

A Narrative Inquiry
into the Experiences of Administrators
Engaged in Coaching to
Support the Assessment Dimension
of their Instructional Leadership

FINAL REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE ALBERTA ASSESSMENT CONSORTIUM

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February, 2016

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I. Executive Summary

The Alberta Assessment Consortium, in collaboration with Alberta Education, undertook a professional learning project with three school districts in southern Alberta. The AAC project was designed to support the implementation of *Professional Practice Competency #4—Providing Instructional Leadership with a specific focus on assessment* and employed a specific model for coaching in formative assessment practice. The AAC project was based on the premise that just as formative assessment supports student learning, the application of those same principles of formative assessment can support professional learning for teachers and leaders. A significant feature was a requirement that all participants self-select in order to be considered; thus the focus for the project was on professional learning and growth rather than on teacher or leader evaluation.

The first phase of the implementation project occurred during the winter/spring of 2013. Three regional meetings were held with the full cohort of participants to lay the foundation for the two key strands of the project: 1) enhancing leadership capacity in regard to the content of sound classroom assessment practice, and 2) introducing a coaching model leaders would use during conversations and observations with teachers that would exemplify the principles of formative assessment. Thus, formative assessment became both the *content* and the *process* of the project.

Phase two began in the fall of 2013 and continued through the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. A full-time AAC facilitator worked alongside school leaders to support them in working through the coaching process. While regional meetings were still held once each year with the entire cohort, the project focus shifted to on-site work at each school. The AAC

facilitator worked with each school leader at least three times during each of the two years of the second phase of the project.

Researchers (Clandinin, Fenichel, Menon, Paszek, Saleh, & Swanson) from the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta were engaged to undertake a research component of the overall AAC project. A literature review was completed prior to undertaking the empirical research. Central to the research study was an in-depth narrative inquiry into seven administrators' experiences of professional learning through their engagement with the AAC coaching project. Two smaller research studies, which included semi-structured interviews, took place with three school district leaders and six teachers. Although the AAC coaching project was completed in June 2015, the research component was extended for 6 months in order to collect further data on the sustainability of professional learning that occurred with the project. Completion of the research component and reporting occurred in December 2015.

A literature review of relevant recent empirical research on Principals' Experiences of Professional Learning was undertaken (See Section IV). Based on a thematic analysis of the research literature, the following seven themes were discerned:

Theme 1: Relationship and trust as central elements in principals' experiences of being coached

Theme 2: The principal's role in assessment

Theme 3: The salience of teachers' perceptions of principals

Theme 4: The experience of being coached and of coaching

Theme 5: Early life stories in shaping school leadership practice

Theme 6: The need for professional development and central office support for principals

Theme 7: Principals' beliefs about assessment and leadership practices

While there were three empirical studies undertaken as part of the research, the main study was a narrative inquiry undertaken with seven school administrators from the three participating school districts (See Section V). The narrative inquiry into the experiences of school administrators engaged in coaching to support the assessment dimension of their instructional leadership attended specifically to the experiences of school administrators. Working within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of place, sociality, and temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) foregrounded the experiences of the seven administrators who volunteered to participate in this part of the research. Working intensively with the seven participating school administrators we collected data (field texts) through conversations, annals, field notes, and artifacts. We inquired into the field texts and co-composed narrative accounts with the participants. The second phase of analysis allowed the research team to discern resonant threads that reverberated across the seven narrative accounts. We engaged in this two-phase analysis process to offer a deeper and broader understanding of the experiences of administrators engaged in the AAC coaching project. We identified the following nine threads that resonated across the narrative accounts:

Thread 1: Experiences of Early Landscapes as Shaping Administrators' Professional Learning

Thread 2: Experiences of Kindergarten–Grade 12 Schooling as Shaping Administrators' Professional Learning

Thread 3: Experiences of Relationships as Shaping Administrators' Professional Learning

Thread 4: Experiences of Creating Collaborative Spaces as Shaping Administrators'

Professional Learning

Thread 5: Experiences of Being Assessed as a Teacher as Shaping Administrators'

Professional Learning

Thread 6: Experiences of the Distinctions between Learning and Achieving as Shaping Administrators' Professional Learning

Thread 7: Experiences of Coaching and Being Coached as Shaping Administrators'

Professional Learning

Thread 8: Experiences of Struggling or Being Challenged as Shaping Administrators'

Professional Learning

Thread 9: Experiences of Learning through Practice, and by making Mistakes, as Shaping Administrators' Professional Learning

In the final research conversation with participants in the narrative inquiry, we explored questions around the sustainability of what had been started through the AAC Coaching in Assessment for Learning project. The narrative inquiry into the experiences of participating administrators highlighted the importance of their early and later experiences concerning assessment. Their stories reflected multiple ways in which assessment could be construed and constructed. The focus in the narrative inquiry, and the overall AAC coaching project, positioned administrators as learners rather than as implementers or managers. The experiences of the administrators showed us that their professional practice and learning were shaped by their diverse experiences over time, both in and out of schools, and as students, teachers, and administrators.

All seven of the volunteer participants were open to relational learning experiences alongside family, friends, colleagues, children, and youth. Their experiences of challenge and struggle in life circumstances, cultural positioning, labeling, and in schooling and work situations, allowed them ease in their relationships with youth, children and teachers, including those who are struggling. We noted, particularly, the skill and ability the participants had in what we termed “world”-travelling (Lugones, 1987). With the ability to “world”- travel, their professional learning was enriched by their understandings of the complexities of others’ “worlds” in relation with their own.

We also observed that the experiences of being coached by the AAC coach in ways that were relational, which attended to participants’ specific contexts, and to who they were as individuals, was important. We learned from them how being with a skilled and knowledgeable coach, who modeled the project-specific coaching practices in attentive, respectful ways, allowed them to work from who they are, and are becoming, in their professional learning.

Particularly following our final conversation with participants, we came to see that their perceived value of the specific coach chosen for the AAC project, and of the meaning they ascribed to being coached in ways that attended to their specific contexts (elementary, junior and senior high, urban and rural), and in ways attentive to who they were in those contexts, cannot be underestimated in terms of the relevance and sustainability of administrators’ professional learning. The differences in the ways each administrator discussed the continuation of the learning and practices associated with the AAC project in their schools, showed how important it was that the AAC coaching model encouraged those involved to make it their own rather than follow a perhaps more traditional, prescribed course of professional learning. Further, the AAC model created spaces for professional learning that allowed for individual engagement. We see

that the type of professional learning offered through the AAC coaching project may have multifaceted community-building qualities because the kind of learning spaces it created were not designed to only honour one way of learning, or to function in ways that required administrators to “tick learning boxes.” Our work with participants led us to see how each of their individualized approaches to, and ways of engaging, their professional learning through the AAC coaching project was manifested through honouring difference, “world”-travelling, relationality, and collaboration within their school communities.

This research study contributes to a growing body of literature around professional development, professional learning, assessment practices, coaching models, and instructional leadership. What we observed stands out from the existing literature on professional learning and school reform as it highlights the professional learning of school administrators in ways that situates them not only as leaders or perceived *experts*, but as ongoing learners in their school communities, and because it foregrounds the relational, personal, and situational nature of professional learning, particularly in the context of assessment for learning.

The second empirical study was a study with six teachers drawn from the three school districts. Based on analysis of the semi-structured interviews with six teachers we outlined our findings into the following topics: comparing the AAC model of coaching to previous models of assessment, sharing stories of experiences related to AAC participation, shifting practice(s) following AAC participation, artifacts of professional learning, AAC participation as part of ongoing professional learning, and shifting relationships following AAC participation. Overall results indicated the teachers found their experiences in the AAC coaching process were highly beneficial as the coaching shifted their practices and helped them to become more competent teachers. The ripples from their experiences of learning alongside their administrators showed

the strength of developing more collaborative and relational forms of engaging in professional learning around assessment. We noted that the AAC coaching model focused on conversations, practices, role reversals, and other activities, and fostered a synergistic spirit within school communities. Many teacher participants saw the centrality of time and support structures as important considerations.

The third empirical study was a study of the perceptions of school district administrators from each school district. The semi-structured interview data from the three district level administrators provided some insight into district experiences with the AAC coaching project. All three administrators saw a great deal of possibility for professional learning around the AAC project. Some concerns were noted around the collaborative nature of the coaching model and its impact on the direction of professional learning. However, all three districts are now pursuing further projects as a result of the AAC coaching project, which suggests the project was well received in the three districts.

We outline possible future directions noting that all three school divisions are moving forward with a continued focus on assessment as, and for, learning. The focus on collaborative ways of professional learning through having school administrators learn alongside teachers and students is a very positive direction. We also see strength in keeping the focus in school change and reform efforts on school administrators' professional learning. We see strength in the openness of the coaching model developed through the AAC project. Beginning with where each administrator is in his/her learning allows their professional learning to have the most impact in their practices. We were struck by the sense of agency that teachers and school-based administrators experienced in the coaching model developed and used by the AAC project. It is clearly an innovative approach to coaching that is grounded in the realities of each particular

school and staff. We are hopeful that the developmental work around the coaching model will continue and will be shared in publications and workshops in Alberta and elsewhere. It has a great deal to offer to professional learning and to conceptions of school change and reform.

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II. Introduction to the Project: Setting the Context

The Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) received a 3-year grant from Alberta Education to extend professional learning support for administrators concentrating on the assessment dimension of instructional leadership. The AAC project was designed “*to support the implementation of the Professional Practice Competencies for School Leaders in Alberta (PPCSLA) targeting Professional Practice Competency #4—Providing Instructional Leadership with a specific focus on assessment.*” This competency describes how “the principal ensures that all students have ongoing access to quality teaching and learning opportunities to meet the provincial goals of education” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 5). Within this competency, Alberta Education (2009) outlined the following descriptors of the responsibilities held by a principal:

- a) demonstrates a sound understanding of current pedagogy and curriculum
- b) implements strategies for addressing standards of student achievement
- c) ensures that student assessment and evaluation practices throughout the school are fair, appropriate and balanced
- d) implements effective supervision and evaluation to ensure that all teachers consistently meet the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard
- e) ensures that appropriate pedagogy is utilized in response to various dimensions of student diversity
- f) ensures that students have access to appropriate programming based on their individual learning needs
- g) recognizes the potential of new and emerging technologies, and enables their meaningful integration in support of teaching and learning

h) ensures that teachers and other staff communicate and collaborate with parents and community agencies, where appropriate, to support student learning

i) supports the use of community resources to enhance student learning. (p. 5)

The AAC provided coaching support with a focus on addressing administrators' roles as school leaders who support, implement, and guide assessment for learning practices in their schools. Participation in the AAC coaching project was implemented in three school divisions within southern Alberta and a research component was built into the overall project. Researchers within the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development at the University of Alberta were approached to undertake the research study. Drs. D. Jean Clandinin and Ted Paszek, along with doctoral students Sulya Fenichel, Jinny Menon, Muna Saleh, and Cindy Swanson comprised the six-member research team. In various ways, as teachers, parents, grandparents, teacher educators, former administrators, and former students we have all experienced the importance of attending to assessment and learning. Central to the research study was an in-depth narrative inquiry into seven administrators' experiences of professional learning through their engagement with the AAC coaching model. Two smaller research studies, which included semi-structured interviews, took place with three school district leaders and six teachers. Although the AAC coaching project was completed in June 2015, the research component was extended for 6 months in order to collect further data on the sustainability of the professional learning. Completion of the research component and reporting occurred in December 2015.

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III. Introduction to the Research

The research had the overarching goal of understanding the experiences of school administrators who participated in the coaching project, but also attended to teachers' experiences of being coached, and the perceptions of the project by district administrators.

Specifically, the research aims were:

- a) to conduct a focused survey of the literature around principals' experiences of professional learning in the area of assessment, primarily drawing upon the Canadian context.
- b) to narratively inquire into school administrators' experiences of professional learning through the AAC coaching project as they worked with the assessment dimension of their instructional leadership.
- c) to engage in semi-structured interviews with six teachers within three participating school districts to gain insight into their experiences related to the AAC coaching project.
- d) to engage in semi-structured interviews with three school district leaders to explore what they view as possibilities for professional learning around the assessment dimensions of instructional leadership; and
- e) to discuss research findings in ways that offer potential for new ways to understand administrators' professional learning through coaching for assessment for professional learning.

IV. Literature Review: Principals' Experiences of Professional Learning:

A Review of the Literature

Introduction

There is a long history of the study of the roles and responsibilities of principals in creating and sustaining school cultures, particularly in times of school reform and change initiatives (Fullan, 2008). School administrators, particularly school principals, have long been seen as a key change element in the reform movements (Goodlad, 1984). While there have been some studies of principals' activities during these times of reform, there has not been a great deal of attention to principals' professional learning as they underwent school reform. There have also been some studies of principals' professional development or professional preparation for undertaking reform movements while serving as principals (Fullan, 2008). Much of what is written focuses on best practices and how well principals engage in these best practices (Fullan, 2011). Some of the research appears to be undertaken with a sense of assessment of how well principals are able to fulfill the prescribed duties and responsibilities nested within best practices and hence appears to work from a somewhat deficit view of school principals (Fullan, 2003, 2005). Other studies narrow their focus to attend to only the work of a principal in relation to a particular school reform, which diminishes attention to the complex multilayered contexts in which principals live and work.

While terms to define principals are somewhat contested, we note that terms such as school leaders, school managers, instructional leaders, school administrators, and principals are frequently conflated to refer to the person or persons who serve as principals. It is not our intention to differentiate these terms in this literature review. Our intention is, rather to review

recent, local, provincial, national, and international literature using the term principal and to attend to principals' experiences of professional learning.¹

Methods for Undertaking the Literature Review

Criteria.

In order to undertake a limited review of relevant literature, we focussed the scope of the search by designing a set of salient search terms: principal knowledge, principal learning, principal coaching, principal learning in assessment, and assessment leadership. We employed the University of Alberta's online library system to access several databases and providers: Canadian Business and Current Affairs (CBCA) Education, Elton Bryson Stephens Company (EBSCO*host*), Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), and ProQuest. Framed by these terms, searches were executed within each database to locate and extract relevant research. Searches were limited to English publications, which included articles obtained from refereed journals, as well as research theses and dissertations. We limited our searches to a temporal frame of 15 years. With a view to further vetting the literature, search results were placed in collective online folders respectively identified as Articles and Theses/Dissertations. Netted results yielded 20 articles, and a total of eight theses and dissertations. Literature identified as germane spanned a range of years with the oldest having been published in 2001 and the most recent published in 2013.

¹ At the time of undertaking this literature review we were studying a school reform that intends to shift school cultures to assessment for learning as both classroom and school practice with children and youth. We also attend to assessment for learning as a form of professional learning for teachers and administrators.

Process.

Each member of the research team was assigned a selection of articles and theses and dissertations to read. As a means of summarizing the screened literature, a template was created with the following categories: Abstract, Discipline/Research site(s), Participants, Methodology, Data, Key points/Findings, and a final category of So What?. We used these categories to attend to the practical and theoretical considerations raised in the research. As templates of the articles/theses/dissertations were completed, they were uploaded into a communal online folder for the purposes of synchronic sharing. Each template was discussed in detail over the course of several team meetings. During this period of deeper reading, we recognized that not all of the selected literature met the criteria. Upon culling these studies, 18 articles and six theses and dissertations remained. We engaged in a thematic analysis of the literature and developed seven distinct themes: (a) Relationship and trust as central elements in principals' experiences of being coached; (b) The principal's role in assessment; (c) The salience of teachers' perceptions of principals; (d) The experience of being coached and of coaching; (e) Early life stories in shaping school leadership practice; (f) The need for professional development² and central office support for principals, and (g) Principals' beliefs about assessment and leadership practices. We explore these themes in more detail in upcoming sections. In the next section, we outline understandings of assessment for learning, which is the key reform context of our study.

Assessment for learning.

Assessment literacy is a phrase frequently encountered in research studies and articles regarding student-learning assessment. Stiggins (2001) described it as follows: "Assessment

² While we use the term 'professional learning,' much of the literature we reviewed employs the term 'professional development.'

literacy comprises two skills: first is the ability to gather dependable and quality information about student achievement; second is the ability to use that information effectively to maximize student achievement” (p. 20). Assessment *of* learning usually refers to summative assessment, standardized testing and pencil and paper testing for the purposes of reporting, ranking, promotion to the next Grade, and for establishing credentials. Assessment *for* learning (AFL/AfL) is a contrasting term to assessment of learning and often used interchangeably with the term formative assessment. Black and Wiliam (2009) defined formative assessment as follows:

Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better, or better founded, than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. (p. 9)

In her study of the role of school administrators in the implementation of a change in assessment practice, Hollingworth (2012) worked with 15 teachers, the principal, and the district administrator of a small, Midwestern high school in the United States (U.S.) and expressed the same idea when she observed, “Formative assessments are generally thought of as metacognitive tools designed to support instruction in order to facilitate the creation of a learning profile for students to track their progress over time” (p. 366).

There has been a steady movement for several decades in student learning assessment to move beyond assessment of learning for ranking, promotion, and credentialing to assessment for learning linked to student competency and instructional strategies. Stiggins (2001) wrote about the changing landscape of assessment and particularly about the principal’s role in assessment, stating that “in standards driven high schools, perhaps the most promising dimension of a new

assessment vision is the opportunity to use assessment as a powerful motivator and instructional intervention through student involvement in assessment, recordkeeping, and communication” (p. 18). For Stiggins there are two conditions that help integrate assessment into the teaching and learning process. One condition is the expression of clear, appropriate achievement targets and the other is an assessment literate faculty (p. 20). He goes on to describe a set of standards for quality assessment which include the need for sound assessments to be specifically designed to serve instructional purposes (p. 21). Stiggins describes the principal’s responsibilities as being crucial to developing assessment literacy in schools. His belief is that principals must themselves be - first and foremost - assessment literate and that their subsequent job is to remove all barriers to the development of teachers’ assessment literacy.

Hollingworth (2012) used the terms formative assessment and assessment for learning interchangeably but describes formative assessment “in contrast to more traditional ways of assessing knowledge at the end of a unit of study (summative assessments), and is different from the once-a-year high-stakes State tests that are used for State accountability reporting purposes” (p. 367). Formative assessment is intended to provide the teacher with feedback on student learning so that the teacher can decide on instructional strategies that will enable learners to move forward. An important feature of formative assessment is its ability to enable students to be self-reflective about their learning (p. 366).

In their attempt to develop a theory of formative assessment, Black and Wiliam (2009) identified unifying factors. They suggested that early work on formative assessment is centered on five main activities:

1. Sharing success criteria with learners

2. Classroom questioning
3. Comment-only marking
4. Peer and self-assessment
5. Formative use of summative tests. (p. 7)

They also note that there are three key processes, relative to these activities, in learning and teaching:

1. Establishing where learners are in their learning
2. Establishing where they are going
3. Establishing what needs to be done to get them there (p. 7)

These three processes, in turn, involve three agents in the classroom; that is, the teacher, the peer, and the learner. These processes can be conceptualized as consisting of five significant strategies:

1. Clarifying and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success;
2. Engineering effective classroom discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding;
3. Providing feedback that moves learners forward;
4. Activating students as instructional resources for one another; and
5. Activating students as the owners of their own learning. (p. 8)

Key to the formative assessment discussed by Black and Wiliam are the moments of contingency where the teacher hears and interprets what students are thinking and which may enable teaching moments (p. 10). Black and Wiliam established that even though the teacher's goal is to create student autonomy in their learning, the teacher is in control of learning.

The teacher must be accountable to the students in terms of taking on board, as far as reasonably practicable, the students' needs, preferences, and so on, but they must also be accountable to the discipline into which the students are being enculturated so that they can eventually operate as effective learners in that discipline. (p. 22)

Change in student assessment is part of the pedagogical landscape in schools. We now understand that assessment for learning is an important feature of the professional work of teachers. Teachers are in the process of implementing new assessment approaches and they need the support of school leaders. We have provided a brief overview of assessment for learning as we explored the experiences of professional learning of school principals.

Coming to Terms

In our literature review we encountered terms that clearly meant different things to various researchers and which required exploration. The idea in this section is to highlight some of the more prevalent terms we encountered, their varied usages, and to situate ourselves relative to the available definitions.

Coaching and Mentoring

In the literature that our research team consulted about the professional learning of school leaders, in some cases we discovered that coaching and mentoring are terms that are used interchangeably, while in other articles authors attempted to make a distinction between the two. In their discussion of the CLASS program (Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success) at the New Teacher Center at the University of California Santa Cruz, Bloom, Castagna, and Warren (2003) viewed mentoring as a relationship between an experienced administrator and a novice

principal in the same district and coaching as a relationship provided by an external person and the novice with more specific agendas in mind, perhaps around instructional leadership (p. 21).

It is possible for the novice principal to have both a mentor and a coach.

We claim that effective coaches move between instructional coaching strategies, in which the coach serves as expert, consultant, collaborator and teacher; and facilitative strategies, in which the coach adopts a mediational stance, with a primary focus on building the coachee's capacity through metacognition and reflection. (p. 22)

Celoria and Hemphill (2014) worked with six coaches to new principals over a 1-year period to examine the practice of new principal coaching. In their opening remarks, they treated the terms coaching and mentoring interchangeably. They then go on to elaborate on a concept of coaching where “new principals are aided by coaches, as experts, to move from the role of novice through the process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ toward the ultimate goal of becoming experts” (p. 73). In a study of 40 research-based papers on the mentoring of principals, Hansford and Ehrich (2006) used the following definition of mentoring:

Formal mentoring is a structured and coordinated approach to mentoring where individuals (usually novices—mentees and more experienced persons—mentors) agree to engage in a personal and confidential relationship that aims to provide professional development, growth and varying degrees of personal support. (p. 39)

As part of their review of the literature during an evaluation of coaches' implementation of a specific coaching model, and identification of principals' responses to this coaching, Huff, Preston, and Golding (2013) found two strands of coaching: performance-based coaching and in-depth personal coaching. For the purposes of their article the authors defined coaching “in general as a helping relationship between (1) a client with managerial authority in an

organization and (2) a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals, within a formally defined cooperative agreement” (p. 507).

Israel and Fine (2012) described a 3-year intensive coaching model in principal preparation programs facilitated by university personnel who selected experienced principals to convey theory-based learning using cognitive coaching as described by Costa and Garmston (1986).³ In this frame, coaching involved the entire scope of what it means to be a principal. For her part, James-Ward (2011) described a leadership coaching model in California based on cognitive science where coaching is intended to offer “school leaders opportunities to learn and improve their craft by building a trusting relationship and using collaboration, instruction, facilitation, reflection and transformational strategies” (p. 3). Williamson (2012), as part of a brief analysis of coaching and its benefit to teachers, presents the idea of principal as instructional coach working with teachers. The coaching process, in this view, is focussed but teacher-driven.

Instructional coaching provides individual teachers with one-to-one assistance working on identified instructional needs. It is an improvement model based on the belief that teachers, given an opportunity, can diagnose their own teaching and identify ways to strengthen their work. Coaches help teachers identify the focus and then work with them to reflect on and improve their practice. (p. 1)

³ In Alberta, Johnson and Skytt (2014) reported that peer coaching is being implemented in a pilot project to enhance the leadership competencies and professional self-efficacy of 23 first-, second-, and third-year principals. Based on a satisfaction survey, 100% of the participants, principals, and coaches were satisfied and recommended that Leader2Leader be implemented for all beginning principals.

Loving (2011), in her phenomenological study of which coaching-induced practices are acquired during novice principals' first year as principal, created the following table for comparison of mentoring and coaching:

Table 1

Comparison of Terms

MENTORING	COACHING
Instructional model characterized by “lead by example” thinking	Inquiry-based learning characterized by collaboration
Respect through exemplary work and/or endurance	Helping practice
From within same district	Generally from outside district
Source of advice and information regarding district matters	Confident and expert support
Authority is managerial	Authority is collegial
Provides advice	Leads to finding own solutions
Short-term solutions	Long-term goal attainment
Not new education	New method of induction
Usually over 1 year or as needed	Usually of 1 year experience
Manager	Instructional leader

Robertson (2011) explored new principals' experiences of coaching from the principal's perspective. She questioned how new principals experience their coaching program and how coaching enhances their experience as novice administrators. Unlike the meanings offered by

Loving (2011) above, Robertson (2011) examined the terms mentoring and coaching and ultimately seems to use them interchangeably.

Coaching strategies tend to fall into two categories: the teaching relationship and the personal relationship. The teaching relationship is characterized by knowledge-transmission where the veteran administrator shares strategies for solving managerial and instructional problems. The personal relationship is characterized by knowledge-construction where the veteran administrator listens to and reflects back neophyte concerns and then co-create understandings of the profession, the organization, and other related performance-impeding issues. (p. 6)

Robertson asserted that one of the important features of a coaching relationship is mutual trust.

The four coaching-related themes that emerged from her study are as follows:

- 1) Shaping Reflective, Instructionally-Focused Practice,
- 2) Feeling Supported during Emotionally Stressful Times,
- 3) Having an Authentic, Trusting Relationship and
- 4) Enhancing Relationship-Building through Technology. (p. 17)

As evidenced above, the terms mentoring and coaching are somewhat contested in the literature. That said, there is substantial overlap in their use. They can both, for example, be said to be defined - at least in part - by the creation of trusting, personal relationships and by the presence of some form of knowledge transmission, or sharing, between someone trained/more experienced and someone novice/less experienced. Due to the conflation of definitions in the literature, our team employs the terms somewhat interchangeably in this literature review, but we also came to our own understanding of them. We view coaching as a relationship provided by an external person and/or school administrators with a targeted focus of specific professional

learning and mentoring as a more general relationship between experienced practitioners and novice practitioners with the purpose of induction into the practice of principalship.

Instructional Leader⁴

This term appears repeatedly in the literature to distinguish the role of the principal as manager of a school from an educational leader with responsibility beyond staffing, budgeting, and other organizational tasks. Aimed to investigate the impacts on professional teacher practice and student outcomes, Hert (2010) studied principal participation in an established, executive leadership development program. He paints an interesting picture of the role of the principal in today's schools.

Principals today are expected to be charismatic, energetic, intelligent, and experts in instructional design and curriculum. Principals are expected to be advocates of social justice, role models, experts in assessment, disciplinarians, fiscal managers, policymakers, and community leaders who also create and maintain a culture of high expectations and exceptional ethics. (p. 3)

For the purposes of this literature review, we adopt a multifaceted perspective on the role of instructional leaders, also referred to as school leaders, school administrators, and principals throughout this work. As indicated in the introduction, we seek to understand their experiences and not the varied, externally imposed expectations of what defines their successful performance.

⁴ In the Alberta context, 'instructional leader' is a term frequently used in the professional literature around school reform (Parsons & Beauchamps, 2011).

Thematic Analysis

As indicated in Methods for Undertaking this Literature Review, we identified seven themes in the literature:

Theme 1: Relationship and trust as central elements in principals' experiences of being coached

Theme 2: The principal's role in assessment

Theme 3: The salience of teachers' perceptions of principals

Theme 4: The experience of being coached and of coaching

Theme 5: Early life stories in shaping school leadership practice

Theme 6: The need for professional development and central office support for principals

Theme 7: Principals' beliefs about assessment and leadership practices

The identification of these themes is grounded in our focus on the experiences of principals.

Specifically, our mandate is to explore principals' experiences relative to coaching they have undergone, or offered to others, as well as their unfolding relationship to formative assessment strategies and practices. In the exploration of the themes that follows, our hope is to deepen attention to the situated and relational complexity of these experiences.

Theme 1: Relationship and trust as central elements in principals' experiences of being coached. A theme in the literature revealed the importance of developing and maintaining a positive, trusting relationship between coaches/mentors and principals as they learn about assessment for learning in their practice. James-Ward (2013) in her study alongside four novice principals who received leadership coaching, highlighted an important relationship component. She contended that a "critical attitude" (p. 22) of a coach is the ability to establish

trust, and a trusting relationship, with principals. James-Ward (2013) observed that trust and neutrality complement one another in the coaching/leadership relationship. As noted by one novice principal in her study:

Usually when you speak to someone that is ahead of you professionally, they are someone that is in a supervisory position, so it becomes more difficult to be completely honest about your experience. The neutrality of the coaching relationship removes that barrier. (James-Ward, 2013, p. 30)

Robertson (2011) illuminated the importance of having authentic and meaningful relationships between coaches and novice principals. In her study, trusting relationships between coaches and principals were seen as being the foundation in having honest conversations as principals shared their experiences. Five of the six principals identified their coaches as being a “friend”, and expressed their desire to have the relationship continue even after the formal coaching relationship had ended. Robertson (2011) also noted that while novice principals identified their relationship with coaches as being nurturing, experienced principals described their relationship with coaches as being more collegial.

Parylo, Zepeda, and Bengtson (2012) described a secondary analysis of data from a larger study conducted in the state of Georgia, U. S. where the high value of being mentored spontaneously arose with 16 participant principals during interviews that were originally designed to discuss other aspects of being a principal (p. 121). Using the term coach and mentor interchangeably, they found that mentoring in instructional leadership was viewed as “the best support” (p. 128) by both new and experienced principals. New principals perceived these mentoring relationships as meaningful and important to their practice and, in some cases as “a safety net” (p. 128) where they were able to rely on their mentor for emotional support in a

confidential environment. Like their novice counterparts, experienced administrators appreciated the supportive nature of their mentors, but also considered the mentor relationship as one that helped to build their professional networks. All the principals in the study valued trust and confidentiality in the relationship they had with their mentor.

Loving (2011) also identified one of the key elements of coaching as the need for the coaching relationship to be based upon trust and confidentiality. The participants in her study further noted that the non-evaluative nature of the coaching model was important. One participant, in particular, speaks to both ideas when she said of her coach:

I think she allowed me to vent and in a nonjudgmental way and it allowed me to really say what was on my mind knowing I wasn't going to see her in a meeting and think, I probably shouldn't have said that. (Loving, 2011, p. 75)

It is evident that feelings, and environments, of trust, support, neutrality/non-evaluation, and confidentiality are defined, by the literature reviewed, as deeply important to a mentoring or coaching relationship.

Theme 2: The principal's role in assessment. Several authors illuminated the importance of understanding the principal's role in assessment. In their study of rural Canadian school principals and their varied assessment leadership roles, Renihan and Noonan (2012) referenced numerous studies from the educational leadership literature to underscore the "crucial role that principals can play in improving teaching and learning" (p. 2). Following their study involving 12 principals from three Western Canadian school districts, they emphasized the principal's role in providing assessment leadership, defined in their earlier work as "the role and expectations of formal school leaders in relation to the task of enhancing assessment literacy

among school professionals and paraprofessionals” (p. 1). Drawing from Stiggins’ work, the authors stressed that successful school-based assessment was dependent upon a principal’s assessment literacy and her/his ability to remove constraints to teachers’ assessment literacy.

An administrators’ role in leading assessment is interconnected with their role in leading learning. Brookhart and Moss (2013) designed their study to understand how principals learn about formative assessment practices, how this shifts their teaching and learning, and their relationships with teachers. They found,

Principals who saw themselves as learners were best able to lead a shift towards a culture of learning in the school. Conversely, principals who did not see themselves as learners, but as supervisors, led buildings where an evaluative culture still prevailed. (p. 12)

Brookhart and Moss emphasized that administrators need to see themselves as the leading learner in order for a school culture to transform around assessment and contended that as principals grow in their understanding of formative assessment, they also grow in their understanding of what learning looks like in classrooms. Hollingworth (2012) similarly found that “school leaders also served as instructional leaders by learning the research and pedagogical goals of assessment for learning” (p. 377).

In their Norwegian study, Smith and Engelsen (2013) emphasized that, rather than becoming involved at the implementation phase, principals need to be involved as learners from the very beginning of assessment initiatives. They studied the experiences of two principals engaged in a 3-year project aimed at incorporating assessment for learning practices in their schools. Both principals identified their role as one of “knowledgeable authority” (p. 118) in creating an assessment for learning atmosphere within their schools. Smith and Engelsen noted that principals must become involved as active learners in the project from the beginning in order

to be trusted by teachers and to lead the project effectively. Without seeing themselves as learners, principals are less able to lead the school atmosphere towards assessment for learning practices.

While the principal is positioned as the “lead learner” or “assessment leader” in the aforementioned studies, sometimes the principal’s primary role is also one of providing external support. For example, Hollingworth (2012) contended that, alongside providing teachers with the requisite training and securing funding, principals also need to facilitate teachers’ professional development by creating opportunities for collaboration through the provision of time and space for discussions.⁵ Further, as referenced earlier, Renihan and Noonan (2012) emphasized the need for principals to remove barriers to teachers’ assessment literacy.

In summary, the role of the principal revolves around their assessment literacy and their ability to see themselves as learners and facilitators in the shift to assessment for learning practices within their schools.

Theme 3: The salience of teachers’ perceptions of principals. The ways in which teachers perceive leaders are important contextual factors to the experiences of administrators. To better understand the experiences of administrators in their work with teachers around coaching and/or assessment for learning, attention must be paid to how school leaders’ effectiveness is understood by teachers.

Identifying teachers’ perceptions of principals’ effectiveness as evaluators, Zimmerman and Deckert-Pelton (2003) worked with 86 teachers from five different Florida counties using a

⁵ In the Alberta context, Wright and Marianicz (2014) emphasize ways in which they have created a theory for teaching and learning, which includes “(1) reconceptualizing organizational routines and artifacts, (2) building collaborative structures, (3) supporting ongoing professional learning, and (4) intentionally engaging in individual and collective reflection” (p. 19).

survey method. The results indicated that there were four key areas, identified by teachers, in order for principals to engage in effective evaluation of teachers. These included the interactions between teachers and principal, consistency in evaluations, a commitment by the principal for effective professional evaluation, and the principal's knowledge in pedagogy, content, and evaluation. The authors concluded that teachers perceive principals as both an encumbrance and a facilitator to the evaluation process. Teachers in the study seemed to view the evaluation process "as holding great potential for improving their pedagogical knowledge, skills, and abilities" (p. 34). However, "When teachers believe that their evaluators do not have the pedagogical background necessary to critically evaluate their teaching, they lack trust in the process, their evaluators, and the results" (p. 35).

Based upon a U. S. national study of 100 elementary and secondary school principals and 300 teachers, Benedict (2005) sought to verify the degree of pedagogical knowledge principals' had about research-based practices that support student achievement. She contended that there may be a discrepancy between the way principals and teachers perceive the principal's instructional leadership practices. While principals saw themselves as central to the learning process, teachers regarded the principal's instructional leadership role as consisting mainly of providing support and encouragement.

Hollingworth (2012) emphasized the "evolving roles of the individuals on the school leadership team as a catalyst for innovation in instruction and classroom assessment" (p. 365) with a particular focus on the responsibility teachers take for student learning using formative assessment. In her work, there were 15 teachers (39%) of the staff on the Building Leadership Team focussed on formative assessment. Teachers viewed principals as a "catalyst for building teacher knowledge and implementation of formative assessment practices" (p. 365). It is

important to note that “the success of the change initiative hinged on relationships between teachers and school leaders” (p. 365).

What was apparent in this theme was the importance of the congruity between principals’ perceptions of their work as instructional leaders with teachers and teachers’ perceptions of the principals’ knowledge and skills.

Theme 4: The experience of being coached and of coaching. Despite the variance in use and meaning of the words “coach” and “mentor” as previously discussed, there is a powerful sense in the literature reviewed that coaching and mentoring can be a vital part of school leadership practice, development, and sustainability (Hert, 2010; Parylo et al., 2012; Robertson, 2011). One principal, despite “knowing that he would be unable to have the same coach as he had his first year . . . did not hesitate when asked to participate in the program for a second year” (Hert, 2010, p. 96). This suggests “it’s the discourse. It’s the conversation. It’s the combination of camaraderie, critical friend, sort of a thinking partner to speculate and wonder with” (Robertson, 2011, p. 30) that is most valuable to the relationship of a principal with his/her coach or mentor. Huff, Preston, and Goldring (2013) noted that it is the delivery of a coaching model through deep, not superficial, discussion (pp. 510, 518–519) which makes coaching truly valuable. They contended that it is the use of “role play” (p. 519), recursive feedback conversations, the ability to track progress and refine goal-setting strategy (p. 520), and careful attention in each coaching session to the review of past experience and discussion of “upcoming concerns” (p. 520) that encourage the success of coaching programs with principals.

Parylo et al. (2012) searched for thematic understanding of mentoring as discussed by participating principals, and identified five general themes where mentoring was found to:

1. enhance the ability to recruit new leaders (p. 127)
2. help socialize acting principals away from isolation in their work (p. 128)
3. offer a powerful form of support in their daily practice as principals (p. 128)
4. was a form of professional development (p. 129); and
5. acted as a reciprocal process which benefits both the mentors and the mentees. (p. 129)

Noting that relationships with mentors defined by “non-judgmental,” “non-intrusive,” “ask anything,” “anytime” (p. 128) practice were especially valued by the novice principals in the original study, it was generally observed that all the principals “valued the non-evaluative nature of mentorship they received” (Parylo et al., 2012, p. 130). McGough (2003) collected the stories of 23 veteran principals with a view to understanding how they became aware of, and committed to, new perspectives and practices. A key participant in his study said, “How do I determine which mentors I hook on to? Number one trust and credibility. Somewhere there is a mechanism that says I can learn from this person, they are trustworthy . . . they have my best interest in mind. I don’t feel manipulated” (p. 465).

Roberston (2011) brings specificity to the idea of “anytime,” “anywhere” (Parylo et al., 2012, p. 128) support through an unanticipated emergent theme in her study, namely that email held a particular importance to the coaching relationship (Robertson, 2011, p. 42). She reported that five out of the six principals in her study felt that the unlimited access to email support by their coaches, as provided by the coaching model in which they were engaged (p. 16), acted as “a meaningful point of connection that alleviated the feelings of isolation and inadequacy, summaries that captured their experiences for further reflection, and related to this, as an action plan for future work” (p. 42).

In addition to the many potential benefits of being coached/mentored, there are perceived benefits to acting as a coach/mentor. It has been found that the best mentors were practicing principals who have a ‘strong desire to learn and be willing to commit time’ to mentoring. Additionally, mentoring was described as a professional learning opportunity for experienced principals” (Young et al., as cited in Parylo et al., 2012, p. 124). Parylo et al. (2012) also found that the mentors in the Georgia study perceived being a mentor as “very gratifying,” “ongoing and timely,” and “very informative” (p. 129); that it “promoted relationship building among the leaders in the district” (p. 129) which, in its turn, reduced feelings of isolation often tied to being a principal (p. 129). One mentor made a point of saying, “I am not so foolish to believe that I cannot continue to learn. I don’t need to reinvent the wheel. I enjoy that mentoring opportunity” (p. 129). Additionally, when coaches are also responsible for liaising with district leaders, James-Ward (2011) found that there could be disparity between district intent and principal understanding of district initiatives and mandates (p. 7). The implications for the ways in which coaches might help mediate these misunderstandings—effectively first locating and then filling a crucial communication gap - and be able to share “principal’s concerns” (James-Ward, 2011, p. 8) also speaks to the value of the coaching and mentorship of principals.

The literature reviewed serves to bring into relief the multifaceted experiences of coaching/mentoring and being coached/mentored. Positive experiences and effects of coaching/mentoring seem to touch upon ideas explored in Theme 1 and Theme 3, as they invoke ideas of trust, support, relationships free of judgment or evaluation, establish that the best coaches/mentors are those with openness and humility and add that the best coaching/mentoring relationships provide *anytime* access to support.

Theme 5: Early life stories in shaping school leadership practice. Though it is evident that coaching and mentoring have influence on the professional learning of school leaders, we found that early experiences with leaders and leadership are also key in the development of a school leader's practice. A current school leader's first, and/or most noteworthy, encounters with teachers, principals and sports coaches, etc.—when reflected upon as part of professional learning—have been found to illuminate the way a school leader approaches learning and defines themselves as a leader (Mackay, 2012; McGough, 2003).

Describing a “learning story” as “the landscape of private inner dialogue within which the constructs of meaning as established over one's lifetime are organized and processed,” and as a “co-constructive mediator to one's everyday agency in the world,” McGough (2003, p. 450) showed that the way school leaders approach their work is initially shaped by such things as “teaching as a family business, parent or guardian constantly emphasized value of school, disabled family member in need of care” (p. 459). Through her work with 200 novice and veteran instructional leaders in the United Kingdom (UK) as part of what was the Aspiring Principals and Senior Leadership Programme, Mackay (2012) used the language of “personal leadership theories” (p. 405) and “coherent leadership story” (p. 393) as distinguished from official “published models” (p. 405) and asked participants to sit for an hour and a half engaged in the creation of a timeline “to capture their earliest experiences” (p. 395). She found that participants hold “attachment to particular images and ‘mantras’ of leadership developed from their earliest experiences” (p. 397). These “mantras” “might include, interactions with fathers and mothers, siblings, as well as early experiences with institutions such as schools and social structures” (p. 397).

Through engagement with these early stories, many participants in Mackay's (2012) study were surprised to discover links between early encounters with leadership and their current practice as school leaders (p. 397). McGough (2003) found it noteworthy that all 23 of his participants "held a strong positive regard for schooling and teaching formed during their childhood years that continued to sustain them as administrators" (p. 460). It is also clear that school leadership practice is not only defined by positive experiences of school or of leadership, but by negative ones where negative role models can be viewed as those examples to be avoided (Mackay, 2012, pp. 398–399). Mackay's work further suggested that a deepened understanding of one's "leadership story," and an ability to know how to frame and present it to others, could lead to more effective leadership (p. 404). The idea at play: that when we take the time to know who we are and where we come from, we are better able to relay ourselves, and relate, to others as people who also carry their own "learning stor[ies]" (McGough, 2003, p. 450) or "leadership theories" (Mackay, 2012, p. 393).

Finally, McGough (2003) and Mackay (2012) make it clear that neither reflective practice nor leadership take place in isolation. McGough (2003) pointed out that the evolution of leadership identity is marked by an "interpersonal factor" (p. 467) and Mackay (2012) articulated that both identity construction and leadership are a "social process" (p. 405), collectively enabled, which has important "implications for leaders of organizations," including, but obviously not exclusive to, school administrators (p. 405).

Theme 6: The need for professional development and central office support for principals. Principals need to be supported as they learn to shift the school culture to assessment for learning. Smith and Engelsen's (2013) study reinforced the idea that even though

teachers are the key to change in assessment for learning, principals are also an important factor. As teachers are learning how to implement change, principals need to learn as well in order to provide support and leadership.

The principals claimed that they had not only learned more about assessment, goal-setting and criteria, but they understood that the processes they themselves had gone through as learners about AfL, could be transferred to teacher learning and to student learning, thus having an impact on the whole school. (p. 113)

Principals learned along with the teachers through consultation with the literature, visits to other school sites implementing the same types of change and through collaboration with teachers in job embedded practice. One finding of this study was that principals need time to work on the implementation project. The project had been funded to allow for some teacher time but had neglected to account for the additional time needed by the principals. An important feature of this study was that it focused on the voice of principals in the change process.

Renihan and Noonan (2012), in their Canadian study, also proposed that the principal is important in the change process and must become assessment literate to be an effective facilitator of change. They highlighted some unique problems caused by limited resources, distance, and sparsity in rural settings and emphasized that while principals need to have leadership skills, particularly in the area of instructional leadership, they also need professional learning.

In the context of rural schools, the issue arises as to the supports available to principals, not only in acquiring knowledge, appreciations and skills required of assessment leadership, but using them effectively given the powerful constraints placed upon them by their context. (p. 1)

The principals emphasized the importance of knowing what is happening in the classroom, and having the “big picture” concerning assessment practices in their building.

The role of the principal in support of teachers in change implementation is evident in many studies and this study speaks about the importance of central support to the principal.

The policy and action implications of our findings suggest that concerted attention to the articulation of the rural principal’s support system would serve these professionals very well in ensuring coherent and consistent leadership for learning. Those elements of the support system that would seem to hold most promise in this regard include support for relevant preparation, leadership development, and planned mentorship. (Renihan & Noonan, 2012, p. 6)

James-Ward (2011) also recognized that principal leadership is second only to teaching in school improvement. From the perspective of leadership coaches working with principals, she discovered a gap between what district leaders believed about initiatives and mandates and what principals thought: “Overall, the district leaders, although at times visibly disheartened by information provided by coaches were very appreciative of the candor and willingness of coaches to share principals’ concerns” (p. 8). The researcher also found that it was useful and helpful for coaches to interact with each other. She suggested that care be taken when matching principals and coaches and that coaches be recruited from a variety of backgrounds.

Carver (2010) documented a case study of a mentor teacher working with a principal. The mentor teacher’s responsibility was working directly with new teachers. The mentor teacher was concerned with the principal’s instructional leadership and wondered how she might approach educative mentoring and distributed leadership. This case study explored the possibility of an experienced mentor teacher coaching a principal in instructional leadership.

It is evident that school leaders are a crucial factor in the implementation of assessment for learning in schools. To be successful in the implementation of change, they need support in their professional learning, additional time to learn and provide support to teachers, and they need the ongoing support of central office personnel.

Theme 7: Principals' beliefs about assessment and leadership practices. Several researchers pointed to the significant role principals' personal beliefs can have on how they view assessment and/or their leadership practices. Mackay (2012) found that leadership models revolving around "early experiences of exclusion and engagement with peers" could be traced back to the "impact of past managers both negative and positive, teachers, neighbours, local heroes, and first work colleagues, and friends" (p. 398). Extrapolating from her findings, Mackay contended early constructions of leadership may reflect "an unconscious understanding of what is seen to be acceptable characteristics and/or stereotypes of leaders" (p. 399). For our purposes, this study is suggestive in that it implicates the early experiences of leadership as possessing a covert potentiality to shape future leadership practices about and around assessment. Similar in some respects to Mackay's work in the United Kingdom, Parker's (2006) research in Canada emphasizes how meaning "is constructed through experiences" (p. 29). She found 70% of the principals in her sample believed their past and current experiences in diverse leadership roles impacted their understanding of assessment. However, Parker made definitive links to how principals' beliefs informed assessment practices in the classroom and additionally, how these beliefs influenced leadership practice.

Parker (2006) conducted interviews with 10 principals from 10 different jurisdictions. Parker determined that each principal in her study perceived the existence of an interdependent

relationship between classroom assessment and learning. For instance, while principals responded favourably to the construct of assessment for learning, “few principals spoke specifically about its impact in classroom assessment practice or learning” (p. 41). Summative assessments were acknowledged as significant tools in assessment of learning though opinion diverged in how these assessments could support student learning. Further, principals differed in how they thought about consistency in grading, parental input, sites for professional growth, the impact of teacher isolation, assigning a grade of zero, and whether increased value should be ascribed to traditional forms of assessment or to assessment deemed more innovative. More specifically, principals believed “data can play a short-term and long term role in informing both student and professional learning” (p. 65). Other influential factors discussed by principals included: district initiatives, professional development with special emphasis on professional learning communities, time spent on professional reading, how change is processed in schools, the supervision and evaluation of teachers, and the creation of space by principals for teachers as a way to foster formal and informal discussion. As well, Parker elucidated, “Principals’ philosophies of leadership are tied to their perception of themselves and awareness of their strengths and challenges as leaders” (p. 81).

Whereas Parker’s (2006) research purposely sought to pinpoint principals’ understandings about classroom assessment, Benedict’s (2005) American study explored the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding principal practices about the supervision of classroom instruction and the support of student achievement. Results indicated that principals for the most part have a solid understanding of research-based instructional practices and that they tended to promote such practices. In spite of these particular findings, Benedict ascertained that principals at times encourage conflicting practices and moreover, teachers do not always

perceive their principal's practices in the same light as their principal. Dumas's (2010) research investigated the declarative knowledge high school principals employed in Nebraska, possess (or do not possess) around creating a collaborative environment for teachers. Using a survey instrument, principals were determined as having knowledge in eight of the nine elements of creating a collaborative school environment. Where principals lacked knowledge was in the area of student learning. Dumas recommended current and aspiring principals receive explicit training in the establishment and/or improvement of practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment as a means of ameliorating the gap between knowing and doing.

Taken together these four studies indicate that principals' beliefs about assessment and/or leadership do influence practice in complex and nuanced ways, which defy a superficial rendering of the relationship(s). Separately, each study speaks to unique facets of the same notion. Mackay's (2012) work affirms the significance of prior experience in how principals come to shape their leadership identities. Parker's (2006) research makes the connection between how principals' beliefs on and about assessment can contribute to differing leadership practices. Benedict's (2005) study provides yet another link as to how a principal's perceptions towards assessment can act as a guiding force in his/her practice. Lastly, Dumas's (2010) investigation accentuates the possibilities in producing meaningful change when principals are furnished with the appropriate tools to enhance their leadership practices.

Silences in the Literature Around Principals' Experiences of Professional Learning

In our review of the literature we noted several silences, or unexplored topics, relative to principals' experiences of professional learning as schools underwent reform initiatives. One such silence is defined by the lack of empirical evidence related to sustaining practices of

coaching. While there are calls to recognize and design sustainable practices of coaching, there are no longitudinal studies that show how coaching practices can be sustained over time. For example, while Smith and Engelsen (2013) speak to embedding assessment for learning practices into the fabric of the school culture for sustainability, they do not provide empirical evidence of how this might, or has, been done. James-Ward (2013) discussed how “the value of the coaching experience was grounded in the practicality of the work” (p. 31), and thereby highlights the importance of grounding the coaching experience in daily leadership practices. However, she did not discuss how even the most grounded of coaching practices can be sustained over time.

While coaching was not the main focus of Hollingworth’s (2012) study, she did note that a key role for the administrators was the importance of building in time for reflection and teacher conversations in professional learning communities. She contended, “For sustained change, teachers need practical support in the form of time for teacher learning and collaboration” (p. 377) as well as “the mental stimulus that comes from teacher-initiated professional development activities” (p. 377). In this study, Hollingworth emphasized that “the professional learning communities could not exist without administrative support of innovation and change: specifically, time to meet, money to support new curriculum, and training” (377). As the duration of the study was 8 months without follow up, it is not clear if the change initiatives were sustainable when the time and support were no longer available.

Another silence we noted was that few studies reflect the *voice* and experiences of principals. While there are satisfaction surveys and other methods that survey principals’ opinions and perceptions of the value of the coaching, the studies do not reflect *principals’ lives* in their depth and complexity, as they are going through these experiences. Indeed, Smith and Engelsen (2013) found that because the principal’s role in the shift to assessment for learning is

often not made visible, their role is often not sufficiently appreciated or taken into account. Further, there appears to be a lack of attention as regards principals' professional learning except insofar as they are expected to be able to enact "best practices" rather than beginning with their lives and their learning in practice.

Another silence, suggestive of a possible structural gap, is the lack of attention in the literature to the ways principals may be supported in their work both during and following the coaching experience. While Smith and Engelsen (2013) and Renihan and Noonan (2012) outlined several ways that principals could support teachers, there was only brief mention of the ways principals engaged in assessment-related learning and practices may, themselves, be supported. However, these authors were the only voices in the literature we surveyed to draw attention to the idea that, similar to teachers, principals and administrators need to be provided with time and other material and structural resources.

A fourth silence is the lack of studies that involve Canadian teachers and administrators related to assessment for learning and coaching/mentoring practices. While the U. S. and European studies we consulted provided us with valuable insights, and with the exceptions of Parker (2006) and Renihan and Noonan (2012), the experiences of principals and administrators engaged in coaching for assessment-related learning and practices in a Canadian context needs to be made more visible.

Summary

In our review of the literature the following points seemed particularly salient. For principals to be effective leaders in assessment reform in schools it is necessary that they engage in their own professional learning and experience support in that process of learning. Principals

must become assessment literate if they are to be a support to the teachers in their schools (Renihan & Noonan, 2012). Because growth into instructional leadership is an ongoing process there are complex factors that shape and define this growth, such as: early school learning experiences, alternative experiences with leadership in sports, encounters with significant formal and/or informal mentors, and personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

Despite the few studies that describe the experiences of principals in the process of learning to be assessment literate, there are some promising practices described in the literature. One such approach is the use of coaching by an external coach who works alongside the principal as a guide in the professional learning.

A key feature of coaching is the importance of development, and maintenance, of trust as a central feature of the connection between the coaches and the principals. And, where this trust exists, in the studies we reviewed, the coaching experience is generally regarded as positive.

School leaders learn how to be assessment leaders not by becoming experts but by discovering how to be supportive of teachers in processes of change. Teachers tend to trust leaders whom they feel and observe to have the necessary pedagogical background and who are seen as supportive rather than merely evaluative. Principals learn how to be leaders through collaborative relationships with teachers and other leaders, through encounters with research literature, and through effective coaching experiences.

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V. Narrative Inquiry with School Administrators

Spanning two school years, the narrative inquiry into the experiences of administrators engaged in coaching to support the assessment dimension of their instructional leadership is distinctive in that it attends specifically to the experiences of school administrators. Working within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of place, sociality, and temporality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) allowed the experiences of the seven administrators who volunteered to participate in this part of the research to be foregrounded. In this section we outline the narrative inquiry and the methods we used, including locating participants, the movement from field to field texts and from field texts to interim and final research texts, keeping in mind the relational ethics that live at the heart of all narrative inquiries (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

A. Narrative Inquiry Methodology

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as storied phenomenon, both as a way of understanding experience and as a research methodology (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Connelly and Clandinin (2006) developed the following definition of narrative inquiry, which recognizes human beings, individually and socially, as leading storied lives.

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters a world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology

is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375)

This definition guided our research process as we developed our research puzzle, located participants, co-composed field texts, and through group conversation, interpretation and analysis, developed the composition of interim research texts, narrative accounts, and final research texts which included resonant threads drawn from the seven narrative accounts.

The methodology of narrative inquiry honours the complexities of human experiences, lived over time, in multiple places, and within multiple relationships. Grounded within Dewey's (1938) philosophical view where education is life and life is experience, narrative inquiry is based on Dewey's two principles of experience, *interaction and continuity*, and on his concept of *situation*. The first principle, *interaction*, draws attention to the relationship between the person and the contexts in which they live. This includes the personal and social conditions of an individual's experience. Dewey (1938) wrote:

The statement that individuals live in a world means, in the concrete, that they live in a series of situations . . . An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation . . . The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had. (pp. 43–44)

In Dewey's concept of experience past experiences interact with present situations. The context in which a person lives is shaped by past experiences and continues to shape other experiences. In other words, we are always in relation in the world and our experiences are both

personal and social. Dewey's second principle of experience is *continuity*. He wrote, "Every experience lives on in further experiences" (p. 27). He further stated, "The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies it in some way" (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) developed the idea of narrative inquiry, they wrote,

The idea that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in that continuum—the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future—each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future. (p. 2)

Grounded in Dewey's principles of *continuity* and *interaction*, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualized narrative inquiry as working within a metaphorical three-dimensional inquiry space with dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place.

Beginning in experience and relationship, we remained attentive to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place as we inquired into administrators' experiences. The first dimension, temporality, called us to attend to the past, present, and future events and people within participants' lives. Within narrative inquiry, Connelly and Clandinin (2006) reminded us that people, places, and events are "always in transition" (p. 480). The second dimension is sociality, which draws attention to both personal and social conditions as well as the relationship between inquirers and participants. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) wrote,

Narrative inquirers are concerned with personal conditions, and, at the same time, with social conditions. By personal conditions we mean feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions of both the inquirer and participant. By social

conditions we mean the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise, that form the individual's context. (p. 480)

Place, the third dimension, is defined by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place where the inquiry and events take place (p. 480). Throughout our inquiry, we attended to wonders around how place had shaped, and continues to shape, participants' experiences.

B. Participants

As outlined in our ethics application to the University of Alberta, we attended an Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) meeting in May 2014, where administrators from the three school districts were present. During this meeting, members of the research team were introduced and shared aspects of the research study in the form of a presentation. Shortly after, we sent an email to each of the administrators from a list provided by the AAC and invited them to participate in the narrative inquiry. Participants who were interested in the project contacted a member of the research team. Seven participants expressed interest and agreed to be a part of the study.

C. Ethical Considerations and Ethics Approval

Relationships live at the heart of all narrative inquiries (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and establishing trusting relationships was central as we came alongside participants. Although institutional ethics approval was granted in May 2014, ethical considerations were continually negotiated over the course of the research study. As narrative inquirers, we were cognisant that “inquirers are always in an inquiry relationship with participants' lives. Narrative inquirers

cannot subtract themselves from relationship” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). As the project unfolded, we remained attentive to the lives of participants and continued to think relationally as we first sought participants, met with and engaged in conversations, wrote about, and eventually negotiated narrative accounts with each participant.

D. Methods

Using the methodology of narrative inquiry, we inquired into the experiences of seven administrators: two each from two school districts and three from a third school district. During August 2014–November 2015, members of the research team engaged in six research conversations with each participant ranging from 1½ to 2½ hours in length. Conversations were held in places where participants felt most comfortable. Sites such as homes, restaurants, coffee shops, or work places were chosen. Prior to each conversation, research team members met to ensure continuity across research conversations. Throughout the entire research design process, we were attentive to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space.

In the research conversations, we inquired into their early experiences, their schooling and teacher education experiences, their teaching experiences, their experiences as administrators, and their experiences of the AAC coaching process. Each conversation was recorded and transcribed.

During the first research conversation, we discussed the research study and then obtained each participant’s consent using the approved consent form. We then began to co-construct an annual/timeline, which highlighted significant events, people, and places, over time, in each participant’s life. For the second conversations, annals were revisited and participants were asked to share an artifact that sustained them in their practice as teachers and administrators. In

the third conversations participants shared experiences around assessment. In the fourth conversations, participants were asked to share an artifact related to an experience with assessment and coaching. The field texts included transcripts of the conversations, annals, field notes, artifacts and stories of artifacts. After the fourth conversation, each researcher began a process of moving from field texts to interim research texts by identifying narrative threads from participants' experiences over time. We drafted narrative accounts for each participant. Narrative accounts are interpreted constructions of individual participant's experiences within the three-dimensional inquiry space.

As we moved from field texts (transcripts, field notes, annals, artifacts) to interim research texts, we met as a research team to respond to each other's interpretations and representations written in the narrative accounts. Draft narrative accounts were then negotiated with each participant during the fifth conversation in order to receive response from participants, deepen our understanding about the participant's experiences, and to continue engaging in conversation around all that had been shared.

Between the fifth and sixth conversations with participants, the research team shared and discussed all seven narrative accounts in order to move to a second phase of analysis. In this second analysis, we each read all seven narrative accounts to discern resonant threads that reverberated across the accounts. We engaged in this collaborative process to offer a deeper and broader understanding of the experiences of administrators engaged in the AAC coaching project. Eventually identifying nine resonant threads, we then drafted a Resonant Thread section that could be shared with participants.

In the sixth, and final, research conversation with participants, we brought them the draft version of the Resonant Thread section so that they might consider the places in which their

voices and stories were included and make comments and/or changes. We also shared with them the narrative accounts, as updated from the fifth research conversation, to attend to any of their feedback. We then engaged with each participant in a conversation, initiated by series of previously agreed upon questions, on the subject of sustainability with regard to the AAC Coaching in Assessment for Learning project. To encourage their comfort in speaking freely on the subject of sustainability, we assured them that the sustainability section of the final report would be completely anonymized. Following this, all feedback received was once again shared with the research team as a whole and relevant sections of this report were updated accordingly.

E. Narrative Accounts

The seven narrative accounts are available by request from the AAC office. The pseudonyms of Chance, Jack, John, Spencer, Helen, Johnny, and Jordan were selected with participants.

F. Resonant Threads Across the Narrative Accounts

Thread 1: Experiences of early landscapes as shaping administrators' professional learning. Given a narrative understanding of knowledge as both personal and professional, as experiential, and as contextually shaped over time and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin, Schaefer, & Downey, 2014), it was important to attend carefully to the knowledge that administrators already held as they entered the coaching project. In our literature review of research on principals' experiences of professional learning, we (Clandinin, Fenichel, Menon, Paszek, Saleh, & Swanson, 2014) identified early life stories as a theme in shaping principals' school leadership practices. In conversations with participants, we heard many stories of their

experiences in their early landscapes in home and community places. It was clear these experiences had shaped who they were becoming, that is, their stories to live by, as well as their professional learning. For example, Chance spoke often of how he was shaped by having grown up in rural and small town places. The experience of growing up on a farm, and with both of his parents as educators, has had lasting influence on his stories to live by.

Johnny also spoke of his early experiences with his family and the ways they shaped who he is, and is becoming. He grew up in a family where school mattered and working hard to achieve high grades was highly valued. He spoke of how these familial expectations around assessment, and achieving high marks, continues to influence his professional learning as he places high expectations on students and finds interest in learning more about value added approaches to school reform.

Helen shared how her experiences as the second-generation daughter of immigrant parents shaped her parents' and her views of the importance of schooling. Being the child of immigrants was also visible in John's stories as he spoke of growing up with a strong work ethic. He was greatly influenced by watching his parents work at "hard jobs" with a clear determination to build a new, and sustaining, life in Canada. Jack, also the child of immigrant parents, shared with us how he has what he called "his soft heart . . . because of the way Mom and Dad raised me."

Jordan spoke often with metaphors about who he is and is becoming, especially those that expressed his learning as a child growing up on a ranch. One particularly strong metaphor he offered was: "if a horse bucks you off, you got to get back on." In sharing this, he showed us how he views learning as an ongoing process with the need to have many chances to succeed. As a child, he saw himself as a "hands-on" learner.

Spencer spoke of his desire for stability amidst years of moving from place to place and of the importance of those who “showed up” for him by taking him to sports and other events when his parents could not. In sharing these stories, he drew attention to how those early experiences influenced his idea of how we let people know that they are cared for, that they are seen.

What became evident as we looked across the seven narrative accounts was just how powerful these early influences were on participants’ stories to live by. In the narratives they shared, they easily slid back to home and community places and showed us how they recognized them as significant forces in their lives. The richness and diversity of their early experiences shaped their individual knowledge, their relationship to what knowledge matters most to them, and their relationship to subsequent experiences of professional learning.

Thread 2: Experiences of Kindergarten-Grade 12 (K-12) schooling as shaping administrators’ professional learning. Through our engagement with participants’ experiences of their early landscapes, as discussed in the previous section, another resonant thread was made visible relative to their personal experiences of Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) schooling. We learned from attending to their stories of being in school how these earlier school experiences informed them as they became educators engaged in leadership and assessment practices.

Johnny shared that he had lived an important relational connection with his homeroom teacher in Grade 6, someone who was also a family friend. He said he was “held accountable if he didn’t complete his work,” something which continues to guide his practice as both a teacher and administrator. For Johnny, in addition to this greater accountability, being able to spend

time off of the school landscape alongside this teacher was important to him as it allowed him to develop a stronger relationship with this teacher. Johnny's earlier experiences with his teachers, which were mainly positive and held this important intersection of his familial and school experiences, brings forth strong stories to live by in how he is in relation with children as a teacher and as an administrator.

Helen shared with us an experience she had with her high school Social Studies teacher who created a comfortable and caring classroom environment. She said, "All of us kids felt very comfortable in his class . . . he was the kind of teacher that I wanted to be." This foundational experience has meant that, for Helen, developing strong and caring relationships with youth and colleagues is at the heart of her professional learning.

John, an immigrant child learning and speaking three languages, told school stories of his struggle with English. Despite being dominated by thoughts of "failing [school] every year," he spoke fondly about his Grade 8 teacher who "was one of those consummate positive people who never gave up on anybody . . . John, you can do whatever you want. You can do anything you want. Don't let anybody tell you you can't." John also shared his struggles with the math curriculum and how he learned to "chip away" at it. By valuing supportive relationships and having a strong work ethic, he showed how his early school stories shaped his current stories to live by.

Chance told stories of his Grade 5 teacher who helped him resist wearing the label of "not being good at math" and awakened him to a new plotline for himself. Jordan shared his experiences of living with dyslexia throughout his earlier school years, an aspect of his educational journey that was not diagnosed until university. Like John in some ways, Jordan did not see himself as a "good student" and was placed "in a room not much bigger than this office

for most of my high school life” where he received special attention. These experiences, he pointed out, allowed him to learn alongside diverse students in *special settings*.

Drawing our attention to important early school relationships with people other than teachers, John also spoke about hanging out with “two different groups of friends” when he was in high school. One group was “highly academic” and the others “ended up getting arrested.” He attributes his ability to work alongside students from a diversity of social and economic backgrounds to these complex friendships in his early life.

In stories that resonated with Jordan’s and John’s, Spencer spoke of the influence of teachers when he told us about “educators who modelled for him that mistakes were ‘OK’ and a part of learning.” This shaped his views that learning was an ongoing process rather than a final product. Long undiagnosed ADHD gave him the energy to do many things so long as the energy was focused but, overall, he described himself as “never the best at anything” in school. It was, in his words, “great teachers” who created opportunities for children, including him, to “shine.” All of these experiences shaped his professional learning around creating “a culture of caring” where people “know they matter.”

In addition to the influences of caring relationships, special attention, varied friendships and connections that connect home and school worlds, the participants also shared experiences of social resistance that have shaped their stories to live by. Jack, for example, told us about playing in a high school basketball game. When the coach ordered the team to “stall and keep the score close” because the coach was convinced the team could not beat their opponents, Jack resisted. He spoke out against the coach’s decision that the team could not win and asserted instead that his team should “play hard.” Although Jack was disciplined for speaking out, his experience remains a key part of his professional learning whereby he believes that people

should never be discouraged from trying their best and that everyone should have an opportunity to stand up for what they believe in. Helen called us to pay attention to the potential unfairness of assessment practice in schools. She shared a high school experience where she was deducted marks for providing more information than was asked on in-class assignments. This experience shaped her to work in ways that are sustaining to youth, families, and educators and which have informed her professional learning by “developing and asking good probing questions and helping teachers focus on their reflections of student feedback and understanding.”

As they told their stories of experience, participants showed how their current professional practice, and learning—who they are and are becoming—has been shaped by the varied relational, caring, label-resistant, passionate and occasionally tension-filled influences of their early school experiences.

Thread 3: Experiences of relationships as shaping administrators’ professional learning. In addition to the many early relationships in home and school landscapes highlighted in Threads 1 and 2, we also discerned learning through diverse relationships as a resonant thread. We came to understand how participants’ experiences of learning in relation with colleagues, children, and youth, shaped their educational careers and contributed to their professional learning.

Johnny, for instance, recalled his time working as a new administrator within a northern community and shared how when he purchased a house, a tangible sign of his commitment to the community, it afforded him a new level of acceptance with the teachers and families he worked alongside. In another experience of relationship during his time teaching overseas, Johnny collaborated with a fellow science teacher over many weekends as they re-worked the science

curriculum. Spencer invited us to consider specific dimensions/styles of relationships when he articulated a need he feels to build relationships founded on trust and reciprocity. He named this type of relationship building as central to learning in a “culture of care.” Spencer felt he could best exemplify the importance of relationships by only asking of staff what he was willing to do himself.

Jordan foregrounded three books, representative of particular ideas and values, which he shared with staff. He believed the books helped him to be a better leader and a servant. As he put it, “We wanted it embedded in our staff that one, we’re servants of each other and we’re all leaders despite your title, you’re still all leaders.” Jordan further acknowledged the importance of shaping a positive working environment alongside staff where school is “a great place to be every day” and where everyone “look[s] for the extra things [they] can do.” Throughout her career, Helen’s colleagues have constituted a source of ongoing support and friendship. She conveyed, “That was the same for any of the schools that I’ve taught at in terms of developing relationships with the staff members . . . a lot of them became close colleagues and friends.” Helen conferred value upon strengthening relationships through continued and sustained effort. Each participant shared stories that made clear the importance of building and sustaining collegial relationships throughout their professional lives. It also became evident that they learned from, and valued deeply, their relationships with children and/or youth.

In Jordan’s early teaching career he was employed at a youth correctional facility. He deemed the time “the best 3 years of [his] teaching career,” providing important spaces to learn and grow. Jordan initially believed that because he was the teacher, students had to listen to him. Growth happened abruptly when he found this wasn’t true. He determined that he “had to

change [his] whole approach to kids” which impacted him “as a teacher and administrator and even a person in most ways.”

John’s love for his own three children showed how being a father helped him in his professional learning. We saw that his children served as evocative touchstones, markers, which seemed to echo and inspire John’s strong wish to meet the needs of all students. Drawing on experiences in a program that took him into family homes as well as his experience as a teacher and administrator, Spencer felt strongly that we can “avoid so many problems if we just get out there and build relationships with kids.” Helen too shared stories of how beneficial it can be to work alongside students outside of classroom settings.

In a story that illuminated still more dimensions of relational care, Johnny recollected working alongside a group of children overseas. He observed that others had described them as ones “nobody wanted.” Johnny dismissed this flattening plotline or single story (Adichie, 2009) of them and worked with them to craft another. He shared how the students rallied around him during the stressful time when his grandfather passed away and told how several students tried to sneak back into his class though they were no longer technically his students. Jack, like Johnny, through many coaching experiences, also worked alongside youth so that they could find spaces of belonging and feel safe irrespective of who they were perceived to be by peers and teachers.

Each administrator showed how relationships with children, youth, colleagues, and community members *all* matter to processes of learning in schools. From signs of relationship commitment made by purchasing a home in a less centrally located community to flat refusals to accept unquestioned labels on students, or foreclose on their potential, participants showed us that doing the work to build and maintain relationships is a multifaceted and crucial aspect of their professional learning.

Thread 4: Experiences of creating collaborative spaces as shaping administrators' professional learning. Built upon the value of caring relationships to participants' practice and professional learning, as exemplified at least in part in Threads 1 through 3, their stories helped us identify a resonant thread centered on the creation, nurturance, and use of collaborative spaces. The collaborative spaces to which participants drew our attention seem to be marked by their non-evaluative, non-judgmental expressions. In the participants' experiences, collaborative spaces exist in processes of dialogue as well as in physical environments such as school clubs, or professional development programs such as the Alberta Assessment Consortium (AAC) Coaching project.

Helen helped us attend to collaborative spaces when she spoke about “working in a different way.” She highlighted her background in counselling as a way to navigate her administrative work on discipline-related issues in more relational ways and specifically invoked various school clubs where safety and collaboration were encouraged. Jack, an avid world traveller, invited yet another view of collaborative spaces when he shared with us how the experience of being an outsider in a country “where you don't speak the language” helped him develop a more empathic, supportive, non-judgmental perspective when he encountered students who arrived in Canada not able to “speak the language.”

As in Thread 3, Spencer expressed the importance of empathy in the nurturance of collaborative spaces when he said, “if I'm not out building relationships with kids and I'm not working to build relationships with my staff, I can't ask my staff to do that.” Chance invoked related practices of humility, observation, and dialogue in relation to collaborative spaces when

he shared his experience of being assigned to be a Grade 4 team leader even though he was new to teaching Grade 4.

Various obstacles to the creation of collaborative spaces were also exemplified in participant experiences. Three in particular stood out. First, Spencer reminded us that the availability of resources and time, as well as the presence of trust, are often deciding variables in the formation, and sustainability, of collaborative spaces with/for teachers especially. Second, Chance highlighted how easy it was, as an administrator, to be even temporarily pulled away from reciprocal, collaborative practice by the perceived pressures to be an “expert.” And third, John cautioned us to consider that conversations alone—no matter how reciprocal—are not always enough to genuinely change practice in schools.

Participants’ experiences drew attention to how the nurturance, effective use, and importance of collaborative spaces were tied to the building of humility, empathy, trust, and reciprocity. Seen variably in/as conversation, relationship(s), physical environments, and community, the collaborative spaces described in participant’s stories took many forms and informed their professional learning in varied ways.

Thread 5: Experiences of being assessed as a teacher as shaping administrators' professional learning. Linked to the ideas of trust and safety offered in previous threads, participants helped us discern another resonant thread when they shared stories of being assessed as teachers. As we looked across the narrative accounts, we shared the sense that these experiences have shaped, and continue to shape, their professional practice and learning around leadership and assessment.

Jordan, Helen, and Johnny experienced a sometimes-uneasy spectrum of feedback during their early teaching careers. Though Jordan did have the benefit of receiving detailed, specific feedback about his practice, he also received feedback that wasn't substantive and where the only comment was, "You're a good teacher." Johnny discussed how as a beginning teacher he did not get the kind of constructive, useful feedback he desired; the kind he felt could really help him grow in his professional learning. In her third year of teaching, Helen was grateful when she finally did get more detailed feedback based on informal observations rather than the checklists that had accompanied previous formal assessments.

Based upon her experiences being assessed as a teacher, Helen stressed that assessments must be sensitive to the demanding lives and comfort levels of teachers. For Johnny, the contradictory experience of not being granted an interview at the same school where he had previously been given a "glowing recommendation from that [school's] principal" also consciously shaped how he assesses student teachers and beginning teachers. He noted that assessments must offer teachers sincere feedback.

John's stories of being negatively assessed as a pre-service teacher made visible the complex ways in which certain types of assessment can impose stories on teachers. Chance described a sense of feeling "deflated" after he was evaluated for the very first time as a

substitute teacher in a new school district. While being assessed/evaluated as a teacher can impose negative stories, Jack showed us how assessments can also open up possibilities. He spoke about how he had been encouraged to pursue administrative positions because his principal saw something in him. This more positive experience of being assessed continues to influence how he approaches assessments as an administrator and as a coach.

Through their stories, the participants showed that their professional learning as administrators was very much affected by the ways they were themselves assessed as teachers. Through the importance they placed on being sincere, sensitive, and offering clear detail, all with a desire not to “deflate” teachers, they showed the importance of forward-looking approaches to teacher assessment.

Thread 6: Experiences of the distinctions between learning and achieving as shaping administrators’ professional learning. In our awakening to the ways being assessed as teachers informed participants’ professional learning, as discussed in Thread 5, we began to see how several participants expressed tension in their early and ongoing negotiations of summative evaluation and assessment for the purpose of student learning. Helen, for example, remembered a teacher who refused to award full marks to students because she did not want them feeling that they didn’t need to work as hard anymore. Furthermore, as mentioned in Thread 2, she described how there were “no discussions” about assessments, “it was either you knew it or you didn’t know it. That was the way it was in school.”

As a teacher, Helen was always cognizant that students are required to write final exams and/or Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs), but she was more attentive to their processes in learning. Rather than when emphasis is placed on results, Helen feels that this process-oriented

approach to teaching and learning is complemented by the shift towards assessment for, and as, learning, and away from assessment of learning.

John spoke about repeatedly feeling judged or assessed when he was younger. “So in terms of being judged or assessed, I hated exams. I hated tests. I hated anything that came back.” He preferred the assessments he received from his karate instructor which were written observations with the goal of improving his technique. When John started teaching, he employed a weighted distribution and a traditional evaluation process because that was what was expected. Over the years, though, his views on assessment have shifted to focus more on formative assessment.

As a learner with a disability, still undiagnosed in grade school, Jordan remembered struggling with test anxiety, especially when it came to reading and understanding test questions. Earlier in his teaching career, he constructed tests that were more conventionally rigorous and made them conform to the philosophy of the bell curve. He didn’t think too much about whether the test questions themselves were well crafted, whether he had taught the material as effectively as he might have, or whether a child might be having a bad day. Now, from an educator’s perspective, Jordan supports project-based learning and believes in “redo the test” because he feels that traditional testing has a finality that doesn’t make sense in real life. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that testing was less important than making sure that all the students in his classroom were learning the material.

In a way that built upon the idea of a child having a “bad day,” Jack and Spencer called attention to how various students have been impeded in their academic lives by circumstances beyond the borders of the school and beyond their control. Spencer also returned us to Jordan’s uncertainty about the value of testing because Spencer’s high school years occurred in a stretch

of the 1970s and 1980s where diploma exams were discontinued. He seemed to feel that the absence of these high stakes tests shifted the ways his teachers were able to teach him. He describes that this shaped his relationship to learning, to the nature of what it means to succeed in school, and to his broader relationship to the role of assessment in schools. He characterizes assessment as that which captures how learners are doing in their learning and, conversely, described evaluation, particularly in the form of end-of-year high-stakes testing, as being more like an autopsy. He didn't feel much can grow, or be learned, from an autopsy.

Through inquiring into their stories of assessment and evaluative practice, we noted participants' attention to the importance of considerations of how students' experiences can affect both how they learn and how they do on tests.

Thread 7: Experiences of coaching and being coached as shaping administrators' professional learning. We also noted a resonant thread woven from participants' stories of being coached in the AAC assessment for learning project, and elsewhere, as well as their experiences of being coaches. Helen described how as a student she often helped her fellow students with math or chemistry assignments. As an administrator, Helen has coached students in extracurricular activities and has worked to create differentiated and supportive learning strategies for diverse types of learners. Further, she described being coached and supported by colleagues in the different places she has worked. Helen appreciated the AAC coach and the learning accomplished alongside her, she feels the project has been positive for both administrators and teachers. In particular, she appreciates the use of dialogue around innovating assessment practices without the pressure of evaluation. Johnny, in agreement about the drawbacks of more traditional evaluative practice, believed that the process of coaching inherent

to the AAC project allowed for deeper and more meaningful conversations around student learning and assessment.

In his stories of coaching, John described how he continues to hone his coaching skills as part of his instructional leadership. He observed that, as in coaching volleyball, skill development is an ongoing process and suggested that the same is true when teachers or principals are developing new skills. It was noteworthy to him that the AAC coaching project allowed him to be less directive with teachers because he knows that teachers need to develop their own practical knowledge. Jack found that the AAC coach steered the conversation about classroom observation away from evaluative language to a dialogue about assessment practice and felt that the process helped him grow in relation to assessment practices.

Attracted to the idea of the reflective process where conversation is about how we might do things differently next time, Spencer felt that the support from the AAC coach made a difference because she was able to bring wisdom and knowledge to the conversation, and because she found ways to foreground the formative and relational aspect of the collaborative coaching process. For his part, Chance noted that the AAC coach helped him develop confidence in coaching as he worked toward collaboration rather than evaluation, conversation rather than prescription. Similarly, John shared that his experiences with the AAC coach set a tone to the project of collaborative conversations rather than evaluation. Helen also valued the nature of the classroom visits during the AAC project for their non-evaluative approach and for how they allowed her to get “feedback from teachers as well.” For her, the coaching format highlighted the importance of reciprocity in the creation of collaborative spaces (see Thread 4).

Johnny deepened our understanding of the collaborative and relational nature of the AAC project when he highlighted ideas of trust and safety in the story of a teacher who had seemed

“walled off” from the AAC Coaching Model and then began to open up to the process. In Johnny’s words, this teacher began to feel safer because “they went through and understood this isn’t the big nasty sort of supervision evaluation thing that we thought it was going to be.” Spencer singled out ways the AAC coach’s incorporation of the specific text by Dylan William into the process, allowed everyone to work from a shared place in their professional learning through the use of a “common language.” The project had value to Jordan for its hands-on practical approach that goes beyond reading theory or listening to a speaker. We were also reminded of Helen’s comments about reciprocity, when Jordan expressed his feeling that the AAC coaching experience works well because teachers observe that administrators are also being coached.

Johnny, Jack, and Helen, through stories of their experiences with the AAC coaching project, spoke of transferability and interconnection with other district and school initiatives and mandates. Johnny shared, for example, that he was able to use what he learned from the AAC coaching with a student teacher and her mentor teacher alongside the required district assessment format, and Jack shared that his experiences with the AAC coach had given him new ways to approach other learning initiatives. Helen spoke to the cumulative nature of professional development practice as she pointed out connections between the AAC coaching project, other district initiatives, and her school’s moves toward formative assessment.

Overall, participants shared stories of their experiences of being coached and of being coaches. Specifically, they highlighted the collaborative, practical, and knowledgeable practices of the AAC coach.

Thread 8: Experiences of struggling or being challenged as shaping administrators' professional learning. Related to some stories of their early landscapes and assessment experiences, and to their conceptions of collaborative spaces, we noted resonances between participants' experiences of working through their own life challenges and how they were then able to attend more closely to the experiences of students and their families. We were reminded of the work of Lugones (1987) who developed a concept of what she terms "world"-travelling⁶. "World"-travelling draws attention to how someone perceived as an outsider "has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where she is more or less 'at home'" (p. 3). Those who have learned to "world"-travel are able to more easily imagine the storied lives of others. Through participants' stories of experience, we saw how they had learned to be "world"-travellers.

For example, John grew up as a son of immigrant parents who strived to provide him with a good home in challenging circumstances. He spoke of the family's lack of wealth and material goods, of frequent moves, and of learning new languages as their moves took them across the country. He told stories of being "not a good student academically" and of needing to "chip away" at learning and how he moved readily between very different groups of students in his own schooling. As a result, he can understand the many struggles that children and youth experience which shape their lives in schools. In his words: "Sometimes our teachers forget that these kids are individuals." In his professional practice, his experiences help him attend more

⁶ Lugones (2003) discussed how her use of double quotation marks around "world" in "world"-traveling is an intentional way of clarifying that she does not use the term in an abstract, utopian manner, but rather to describe specific spaces inhabited and experienced by an individual(s).

carefully to others, to who they are and are becoming, and to who he, and teachers, might be in their lives.

Also the child of immigrant parents, Jack's stories showed how he learned to "world"-travel as a child and youth. He told us about the importance of attending to the lives of students and shared how he had learned from his parents and family to be empathic and to care for those around him. He knew from his experiences of being supported by family and teachers that it was important to work with students so they too were encouraged to belong, to do well, and to have opportunities to achieve and to learn. Like Jack, Helen's parents were also immigrants and she also learned early how important it was to be encouraged to pursue schooling. Because she did not struggle with school she was able to help her friends as an informal tutor. As she came to understand that not everyone felt safe and comfortable in processes of learning, she worked to find ways to provide help that would be relational and educative.

Other participants also learned to "world"-travel because of their experiences. Jordan struggled with unidentified dyslexia for his K-12 years and subsequently spent much of his schooling in the somewhat marginalized spaces of special education classes. These lived experiences unintentionally taught him to see himself as not a good learner. Through connection to his experiences of working with horses on his family ranch, he came to make sense of school through alternative stories of perseverance and resilience. His father modelled for him the necessity to not give up, to commit to learning, and as a beginning teacher he was drawn to work with students who found themselves at their own edges in a youth correctional facility. He continues to make his dyslexia visible and encourages others to find, share, and build on their strengths.

In another aspect of “world”-travel, Chance shared how his life has brought him back to his home community to teach after years of being away. He recognized that many of the teachers and parents in the community have stories of him shaped by his behaviour as a youth. He is now awake to the importance of “world”-travelling into these stories of him as someone who did not always act wisely so that they can be disrupted and new stories of him can be created. Johnny also told stories of frequent moves as a child/youth with his family and how he continued to move in his early years of teaching to places both around the province and also overseas. Through these stories he showed how he had to work hard to fit into communities and to establish relationships and that this has left him more awake to the “world”-travelling of others. He showed that “world”-travelling is a difficult process, which takes time.

What became evident in the stories we heard was that being able to “world”-travel was something participants were able to engage in because of their life experiences. They came to the experiences of professional learning awake to the importance of being able to “world”-travel.

Thread 9: Experiences of learning through practice, and by making mistakes, as shaping administrators’ professional learning. Learning through practice and through mistakes has been part of participants’ professional learning. In several threads above, we highlighted ways that familial and school experiences have shaped participants’ stories of themselves and their professional practice. For example, Jordan’s early teaching experiences in a juvenile correctional facility taught him the importance of differentiating his approach for diverse learners. Similarly, John explained how his experiences as a police officer helped him to understand that working with youth can help break the criminal cycle. For both John and Jordan, the practical experience of their work alongside youth in law-enforcement settings became

contexts for their professional learning in how they seemed to highlight the importance of attending to the wholeness of youth's lives in motion.

Chance's practice of actively "positioning himself at the boundaries, not quite fitting into the boxes on landscapes" has shaped his view of himself as a learner who approaches situations with curiosity. His longstanding tradition of writing about his experiences in notebooks highlights his passion for reflecting upon, inquiring into, and learning from his experiences. Helen has carefully crafted a professional portfolio that she says gives her a sense of the "shifts" that have occurred over time in her learning journey, as well as in her teaching and assessment practices. It helps her to track and remember experiences, contexts, relationships, ideas, and district initiatives. She spoke to us about slowly becoming comfortable, as a beginning teacher, in making use of her personal and professional knowledge and discussed how she also began to be more at ease using practices that she learned about from supervising, and former, teachers.

For Jack, learning through practice has often involved feeling challenged. After teaching mainly chemistry for a number of years, Jack actively sought to challenge himself by asking his principal to allow him to teach physics. Later, following his principal's advice to begin Master's studies in order to be considered for administrative positions in his school, Jack shared with us the further challenges of being a first year administrator and graduate student. Johnny, too, seemed to value learning amidst challenge. He discussed how his past experiences developing common assessments alongside colleagues overseas has shaped how he views the provincial move to student learning assessments (SLAs), a shift that resonates with his belief that the beginning place of instruction must be where children are positioned in their learning.

In a continuation of the idea of being challenged in practice, John noted that, through his experience as an administrator, he has learned how to negotiate one aspect of his practice that he

originally found very challenging. In situations where he may need to refuse a request, particularly from a teacher, his practical experience has made him more confident in saying “no with a why.” He has learned that if he offers an explanation as to why certain requests must be denied it encourages an appreciation of the complexities underlying his decisions.

While the stories they shared were often about learning from educative experiences, many participants spoke about experiences as students, teachers, and administrators that highlighted the kind of practices in which they shouldn’t engage. Based upon her experiences as a student with assessment practices she felt were unfair, as a teacher Helen sought to assess in ways that meshed more clearly with her sense of fairness. Spencer also had one powerfully formative experience working in a school where a lot of what he learned was, in his words “what he wouldn’t do” and spoke of how a lifetime of playing and coaching sports has taught him that what is often called failure is just a part of learning and growth. Helen similarly discussed how mistakes and challenges have always been a part of her learning journey alongside colleagues, youth, and families.

Many participants shared with us how they were able to learn from mistakes. They showed how their own creative, curious, and relational practices taught them to live alongside children, youth, teachers, and families.

G. Sustainability

The AAC Coaching in Assessment for Learning Project was completed in June of 2015. In October and November of 2015 we engaged in the sixth and final research conversation. We worked with each participant to finalize the narrative accounts we had written in relation with them, reviewed with them the draft Resonant Thread Section—particularly those sections

relevant to them individually—and then asked them to engage in conversations about sustainability.

In our ongoing efforts to understand the professional learning experiences of the administrators, we inquired into how the end of the 3-year AAC project affected their learning and assessment practices, as well as their instructional leadership within their respective school environments. When we sat with them for this sixth conversation, they had each begun a new school year. In the absence of the support from the AAC project, we wondered if the professional learning of the AAC Project could be sustained. We asked these questions, cognizant that each administrator was situated in a living community of teachers, students, and families.

In order to facilitate this part of our final research conversations with participants, we created a list of guiding questions. In order to encourage their comfort in speaking freely, we assured them that what they shared with us in this part of the conversation would be anonymized. When we shared with each other as researchers the experiences of discussing these questions with participants, we came to see sites of overlap between the questions and how each researcher and participant took them up in ways specific to their relationships and contexts. With this in mind, we shaped their responses by grouping them with respect to district considerations, school considerations, and considerations specific to the sustainability of the AAC Coaching in Formative Assessment Model:

District considerations. What happens to this initiative when district priorities change?

What happens when central leadership changes?

School considerations.

What happens when teachers move, new teachers to school, beginning teachers?

What happens when school administration changes? You move schools?

Sustainability of AAC model.

What happens to this initiative when resources change?

Has this initiative become embedded?

Sustainability of the change in assessment practices, coaching etc.?

Finally, to honour the promise of anonymization of this section, we chose to exclude any direct quotations, we did not attribute particular observations/thoughts to any of the participants' previously agreed upon pseudonyms, and wrote in a way which combined their responses, but which still highlighted the salient points.

District considerations. Participants offered diverse opinions as to how this initiative was taken up by their districts. Some spoke of the project in terms of alignment to the competencies expected of administrators. Others noted tensions could occur in striving to meet district requirements while doing what they understood was right for their schools. It was highlighted that the tractability of the project permitted schools to interpret district goals in ways which were responsive to individual school contexts. Recognizing district goals and emphases can change, it was suggested that good practice and good teaching involves an understanding that this type of initiative supports student learning and simultaneously empowers teachers. It was also felt that initiatives of this caliber could facilitate other projects. A belief in ongoing collaborative conversations about assessment was also proffered as a way to nurture change.

Each administrator spoke of central office district leadership as pivotal to the lifespan of an initiative. Some suggested, in the absence of strong central leadership buy-in, certain initiatives might not be sustained. Another administrator indicated that school boards and family communities could influence what form central leadership takes thus affecting how projects are taken up, and additionally, the allocation of resources. It was proposed that one possible way to sustain certain initiatives, such as the AAC Coaching Model, might be to have districts incorporate specific questions about assessment practices in their interviews for incoming school administrators.

School considerations. The continuity of practices and professional learning in schools is often affected by the turnover within teaching staff and school administrators. Though each school has its own policies and practices for introducing new - beginning or more experienced - teachers to its school context, it was suggested that the continuation of practices introduced by the AAC model is dependent on their well-rooted establishment, and acceptance, among a majority of staff and administration. In this way, teachers joining an AAC participating school community, but who had limited or no training in formative assessment, might feel the collaborative AAC methods as an intense induction and/or - depending on their own experiences and inclinations - as something tied to its own form of supervision. It was considered that potential tensions might be mitigated through either peer or administrative mentors chosen from staff most comfortable with the AAC model.

Two key facets of the AAC process are collaborative, classroom observation and personal reflective practice. With regard to classroom observations, it was suggested that beginning teachers might be more comfortable having administrators and/or fellow teachers in

their rooms. It was also considered possible that more experienced teachers - perhaps not as initially comfortable with administrator or peer observation - might already be more reflective in their personal practice. In all cases, it was fairly clear that turnover in teaching staff always presents challenges and changes to school practices, and the sustainability of certain initiatives.

Equally evident was the feeling that principals shape the directions of a school. Upon reflection, there was a strong sense that the AAC initiative, while not the only initiative at play or of value in each school, was significant to administrators and had become important to many teachers. As discussed in the previous section, district priorities can have a real effect (sometimes supportive, sometimes limiting) on principals' pursuit of certain directions. But, a principal can still find ways to embody practices she/he values in his/her school. Additionally, in ways that make the question of sustainability somewhat more varied and dynamic, participants observed that outgoing principals could choose to take practices, such as the AAC Coaching in Formative Assessment model, with them to new schools. Conversely, an existing teaching staff might take it upon themselves to introduce an incoming principal to what they feel works for them. The latter approach to sustainability is dependent on the passions and interests of an incoming principal. Related to this, it was also expressed that an incoming principal has a responsibility not to copy what already exists, but to make it his or her own.

Sustainability of AAC model. Observations were made that the regular availability of the coach, and the AAC's particular choice of coach, had been significant. Without AAC funding and the AAC coach, the sustainability of the initiative has necessitated that budgets - of money, time, and human resources - be thoughtfully and carefully allocated to ensure that teachers have the needed support to continue in the AAC practices that have become important

to participating school communities. It was suggested that in order to negotiate the tensions that accompany changes in resources, it is important to work creatively within administrative (district, school, community) structures and to create an environment invested in assessment for learning.

Working creatively within administrative (district, school, community) structures and providing a local environment in which everyone is vested in assessment for learning were offered as ways to negotiate the tensions that accompany changes in resources. In some instances, the AAC coaching model has already been rolled out so that - even in the absence of the AAC coach - the school administrators and teaching staff can play the appropriate parts with, and for, each other. In this way the administrators assume the role of the AAC coach, one teacher becomes a teacher/coach and another teacher is the teacher being observed.

Overall, the AAC project was seen to have intrinsic value, especially in combination with other district initiatives. The perceived positive qualities of the AAC initiative have allowed it to build various, school-specific, forms of momentum. School administrators are asking themselves how to keep this momentum going. It was acknowledged that the quality of instructional leadership provided within a school impacts the degree to which understandings gained from the AAC project can be maintained. In keeping with this, perhaps one of the more dynamic signs of the project's potential sustainability exists where even teachers who were at first uncomfortable with the model, now actively seek out classroom visits from their administrators and peers. Thus, adopting a mindset of trial and error was described as being instrumental to any process of sustainability.

H. Discussion of the Findings

The narrative inquiry into the experiences of participating administrators highlighted the importance of their early and later experiences concerning assessment. Their stories reflected multiple ways in which assessment could be construed and constructed. The focus in the narrative inquiry, and in the overall AAC coaching project, positioned administrators as learners rather than implementers or managers. Chance noted that being approached as, and encouraged to position himself as, a learner in the field of school administration, is “a shift, in our division, that’s a shift. I’m not sure administrators were always placed in that position.” Chance further noted that, “just being able to go to a professional meeting or staff meeting and saying, ‘here’s what I learned through this’ . . . is a huge amount of legitimacy” and drew our attention to the importance of administrators seeing themselves as professional learners.

The experiences of the administrators showed us that their professional practice and learning were shaped by diverse experiences over time, and both in and out of schools, as students, teachers, and administrators. Participants’ diverse life experiences, inclusive of coaching sports, personal and work-related travel that allowed them to encounter difference in humbling ways, being raised as the children of immigrants, work in counselling and in district initiatives that brought them closer to the lives of families, work as teachers, and work as administrators, have all contributed to their professional practice, and profoundly shaped their professional learning.

As we engaged with them more specifically around their work as part of the AAC coaching project, we saw that while their past, shaping experiences were richly varied and different from one another’s, they all drew from early familial, community, and cultural landscapes as they engaged in the opportunities offered through the project. And, just as their

life experiences prior to the AAC coaching project were varied, we appreciated how their experiences of the project were also multifaceted and diverse; they did not all take up the skills of being coached, and coaching, in the same ways. All seven of the volunteer participants were open to relational learning experiences alongside family, friends, colleagues, children, and youth. Their experiences of challenge and struggle in life circumstances, cultural positioning, labeling, and in schooling and work situations, allowed them ease in their relationships with youth, children and teachers, including those who are struggling. We noted, particularly, the skill and ability the participants had in what we termed “world”-travelling (Lugones, 1987). With the ability to world travel, their professional learning was enriched by being able to understand the complexities of others’ worlds in relation with their own.

We also observed that the experiences of being coached by the AAC coach in ways that were relational, which attended to participants’ specific contexts, and to who they were as individuals, was important. We learned from them how being with a skilled and knowledgeable coach, who modeled the project-specific coaching practices in attentive, respectful ways, allowed them to work from who they are and are becoming in their professional learning. Each participant engaged in professional learning in ways that had benefit to them in their practice as school leaders and which they also felt had—in ways specific to each school context—helped to nurture safe, collaborative spaces with, and between, their staff and colleagues.

Particularly following our final conversation with participants, we came to see that their perceived value of the specific coach chosen for the AAC project, and of the meaning they ascribed to being coached in ways that attended to their specific contexts (elementary, junior, and senior high; urban and rural), and in ways attentive to who they were in those contexts, cannot be underestimated in terms of the relevance and sustainability of administrators’ professional

learning. Our conversations with participants about the sustainability of the AAC project drew into relief the tight, influential, relationships between district administration, school boards, parent communities and the ways school administrators are able to take up, and continue, certain initiatives in schools.

A balance, it seems, must always be struck between school administrators' ongoing expression as learners within school communities and their responsibilities as leaders, who carry their own experiences and knowing, to find ways to do what they feel best supports the teachers, students, and communities with whom they work most closely. The differences in the ways each administrator discussed the continuation of the learning and practices associated with the AAC project in their schools, became yet another example of how important it was that the AAC coaching model encouraged those involved to make it their own rather than follow a perhaps more traditional, prescribed course of professional learning. Further, the AAC model created spaces for professional learning that was individual. It was possible for us to begin to consider how the type of professional learning offered through the AAC coaching project might have multifaceted community-building qualities because the kind of learning spaces it created were not designed to only honour one way of learning, or to function in ways that required administrators to "tick learning boxes." Our work with participants led us to see how each of their individualized approaches to, and ways of engaging, their professional learning through the AAC coaching project was manifested through honouring difference, "world"-travelling, relationality, and collaboration within their school communities.

This research study contributes to a growing body of literature around professional development, professional learning, assessment practices, coaching models, and instructional leadership. What we observed stands out from the existing literature on professional learning

and school reform as it highlights the professional learning of school administrators in ways that situates them not only as leaders or perceived “experts,” but as ongoing learners in their school communities, and because it foregrounds the notably relational, personal, and situational nature of professional learning, particularly in the context of assessment for learning.

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VI. Semi-Structured Interview Study with Participating Teachers

A. Methods

We designed a semi-structured set of interview questions for participating teachers that sought to understand their experiences with the coaching project. While we at times asked clarifying questions during the interviews, the following question protocol was created by the research team:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. Where and what grade levels have you taught?
3. How long have you been part of the coaching project?
4. How and when did you become part of the coaching project?
5. What were the circumstances that lead to your becoming involved?
6. How does this form of engaging in assessment compare with previous forms of assessment you have engaged in?
7. What are some stories of your experiences of engaging in the project?
8. Has your practice shifted? In what ways?
9. Has your relationship with your principal shifted? With other staff? With children?
10. What artifact of your involvement best represents your professional learning?
11. Was your experience part of your ongoing professional learning?

B. Participants

We worked with the staff of the AAC to learn which teachers had participated in the project with administrators. Our intention was to engage in a semi-structured interview with six teachers, two from each participating school division. We sent an email to all of the participating

teachers and received names and contact information for six teachers who responded to our initial email invitation. We then decided which research team member would conduct each interview and individually confirmed a time and place to meet with participants. Teachers were informed the semi-structured interviews would take less than an hour and a half to complete. All interviews were well within this time frame. The interviews were then transcribed and the research team worked collaboratively to analyze the transcripts.

The six teachers who accepted our invitation to participate embodied a diversity of personal and professional experiences, including: a range of years of teaching experience, grade levels taught, varied school contexts, and number of years of AAC project participation. Teacher participants' teaching experience ranged from 2 to 13 years of practice in elementary and junior high school, and in both rural and urban contexts. For participants, length and degree of involvement in the 3-year AAC project was fluid. While a few teachers had been engaged in the project since its conception, most teachers spoke of intermittent participation. Further, two teachers discussed engaging in more of a "leadership" role, helping to train newer teacher participants, following their first year of participation.

Teacher participants indicated they engaged in the coaching project because they had been invited by their administrators and voluntarily accepted. One teacher noted that because of the size of school and small number of teaching staff, teachers were "signed up" to be a part of project at the beginning and were later given the opportunity to be involved. This teacher later transferred to a different school that was also part of the project and shared that she, "took the place of another teacher who decided she didn't want to do it anymore."

Teachers noted various reasons for being involved in the project. One teacher saw the relevance of the project to leadership development. A common thread among many of the

teachers centered on professional development and improving assessment practices. One teacher indicated that when an administrator invited her to participate, the administrator, “kind of approached me in that this is more her professional growth and I would just assist her and help her in her professional growth and so I said, ‘yeah absolutely because I’m sure I can learn a lot too.’”

One beginning teacher who was exposed to the start of the project in his practicum alongside his mentor teacher said, “I knew this project was going on and initially, when I was hired, I said ‘hey, anything that has to do with assessment or the AAC, I’d love to be a part of it.’” Another teacher shared, “I was approached about it, assessment is one of my objectives on my PGP [professional growth plan], so it was something that I was interested in.”

As mentioned above, the period of time participant teachers were involved in the project varied across teacher participants. Some teacher participants were involved with the project initially yet, as the project progressed, they did not continue. For example, a teacher engaged in the coaching model during the first and second year of the project was not involved in the third year. She stated, “They [administration] didn’t come and ask me this year. I think they just tried to spread it out to somebody else.” Another teacher noted, “There were some teachers who did it last year who didn’t continue this year, which was, I assume, why I got to have the chance to do it this year . . . They wanted to rotate who had the experience so it branched out to more.”

C. Responses

Comparing the AAC model of assessment to previous forms of assessment. When we asked teacher participants how this form of engaging in assessment compared with previous forms of assessment they had engaged in, there were a variety of responses. One teacher said,

“It’s more intense but because of the intensity it was more valuable.” Another teacher reflected, “Even if I just compare [this work] to my previous elementary school, they hadn’t done a lot with assessment at that school” whereas the AAC coaching “was mostly focusing on what was your outcome and how do you know that you taught that, how do you know that the students learned it.” Thinking about the coaching project, the teacher felt that her AAC experiences took her out of her “comfort zone,” but that it was helpful to collaboratively reflect upon the ways her teaching practices could shape student learning.

In their observations of the AAC coaching model, participants shared that respect and trust were integral in the collaborative learning process. One teacher observed, “With the whole coaching model, they don’t really tell you what to do or what you need to work on but they engage you in conversations to come up with your own solutions.” Drawing upon experiences with assessment related to other district initiatives, a teacher spoke to the quality of the feedback from coaches compared to previous forms of assessments:

Yeah it’s very different, absolutely, very different . . . So I remember when I was being evaluated when I first started teaching, it was just a lot of you’re doing great . . . really didn’t provide me any detailed feedback in terms of here’s what you need to work on or here’s what you need to strive towards.

Other participants related this appreciation of detailed feedback, and the time this necessitates, to their own assessment practices alongside students. One teacher stated, “We try to push quantity throughout the year . . . we forget about the quality and taking the time to truly assess each of the individual kids.”

Sharing stories of experiences related to AAC participation. Participants shared particular stories of their experiences of engaging in the AAC project. For example, one teacher noted, “after I got over that first initial bout of nerves and got into it, then it was no problem . . . part of the nerves is that old evaluation sense [where] six people are coming in to watch me and judge me.” For her, the AAC process was “like a lifeline . . . it gave us ways of taking the evaluation and judgement out of it.”

Reflecting on the AAC coaching experience, another teacher believed that the learning “needs to be transferable. It needs to be in everyday practice and constantly being involved in your everyday practice in order for true professional development to occur.” As the teacher described, “The process has evolved. There’s been a couple of tweaks from last year” including integrating “personal reflection again based on the discussion” alongside “more face to face time to clarify anything,” and having further follow-up.

Similar to other participants, one teacher emphasized that much depended on having a good relationship with school administrators. For this teacher, “Being able to act as a coach with a colleague who’s a little bit further ahead in the practice, me engaging as a coach there and asking the questions about the process” was valuable. Referencing a story of working alongside a colleague, this teacher believed that the coaching experience helped to create a more trusting, collaborative environment where constructive feedback is less likely to be perceived in a defensive manner.

Teachers spoke to how being at various stages of their careers seemed to translate into having certain experiences. For instance, one person shared how, as a beginning teacher, evaluation appeared to be construed along lines of possessing strong classroom management skills where

all those boxes [were] ticked off, but nothing was presented to me in terms of you're here but we'd like to see you here and we think that you have the ability to push yourself even further, and it really wasn't a focus on quality of instruction per se or ability to teach the curriculum or different teaching techniques.

For this teacher, participation in the AAC project served to illuminate that "you're never a finished product right?" Other participants told of learning to differentiate between which assignments needed to be marked, which ones did not, and having the space to ruminate over these kinds of considerations. For instance, one teacher felt formative assessments allowed students and teachers to "see the growth in the student" and the summative is "where the student is."

It was also suggested by some that an inverse relationship existed whereby the more experienced one became in his/her teaching practice, the less time was afforded to him/her by administrators. Subsequently, some credited their participation in the AAC project as mitigating that particular tension. As a participant who had been teaching for more than 10 years thoughtfully articulated, "There are things that I'm struggling with and seeking [to] change and pushing myself and just having that opportunity with [the administrator] to sit down and have that undivided attention." In a similar vein, another teacher observed, "There's a lot more support here with our administration, they're a lot more knowledgeable, they're more research based . . . they have a purpose in mind."

Teachers additionally reflected upon student involvement within the coaching process. One participant shared how school administrators sat down with students and had relational conversations. Pointing to a deepening teacher/student relationship, a teacher reflected upon a

moment whereby a shy boy participated in a classroom game to support his teacher in the presence of those who had come to the class to observe the lesson.

Shifting practice(s) following AAC participation. Several teacher participants expressed the belief that their teaching and assessment practices have shifted following their engagement in the AAC coaching project. One teacher believed that his AAC participation “solidified what [he] felt” in relation to assessment because his practice has always been deeply rooted in collaboration. For the remaining five participants who felt that AAC participation shifted their practice, there were differences in the ways these shifts were described.

Two teachers compared their assessment practices at the beginning of their teaching careers to their current assessment practices. One participant remarked,

When I go back and look through what I did that first year compared to now, night and day difference. My assessment practice is completely different, terminology I use with the kids is different, activities are different, the assessment part, it’s all different. And I think it’s a lot better.

Another participant similarly asserted that her assessment practices shifted significantly following AAC project participation when she said, “If I look at how I taught when I first started and how I teach now, yeah 180 for sure.”

A few teachers spoke of being “more conscious” and “more aware” of their assessment practices following AAC coaching. One teacher stated that AAC involvement has “changed the way that I think of different learning activities . . . it’s just made me more conscious of the way that I find out how the kids know.” Another teacher reflected that she is now “more aware” of the feedback she is giving students. She explained she now plans her lessons using “more

strategies and more of the key concepts . . . which I did use before but I try and use them more purposefully now.”

Reminiscent of responses from other interview questions, some participants described how detailed comments, feedback, and conversations fostered new understandings within their teaching and assessment practices. Teachers noted that conversations related to formative assessment served to delineate areas to “focus on” and, additionally, helped to transfer learning or apply “it to other contexts.” Some participants described how participation in the AAC project provided movement away from surface-level evaluations of teaching to opportunities to view teacher/classroom observations as sites for growth. In a similar vein, a teacher discussed the way in which the question “How do you think it [the lesson] went?” often elicited worry, whereas the language used within the AAC coaching model was supportive of professional learning.

Discussing artifacts of professional learning. We also asked teachers to share or tell about an artifact that represented their professional learning. One teacher related her experiences with a game that she uses in her mathematics teaching in junior high school. When she first played the game she “played it as a class with a question on the board.” Through the coaching process, she changed how she uses the game in her teaching—employing multiple computers in the room with different questions—to allow for more student involvement. Another teacher pointed to her bulletin board and indicated a teaching and learning practice that she called “a 10-step story.” Drawing on a popular book series and her experience in the coaching project, she developed a collaborative and developmental process of “what your story should look like.” She

credits her AAC participation with helping her shape relational ways of working alongside students in their writing processes.

Another teacher communicated that through her AAC involvement, she came to understand she “needed to create some kind of organized way to collect little written annotations or things that I observed about the students and their progress.” She began recording her observations in a notebook as a way to help her to see students’ growth over time. Sharing her professional portfolio as an artifact, another participant discussed how, looking over the pages, she can see the changes in her ongoing professional learning journey.

Relating AAC participation as part of ongoing professional learning. We were interested to learn whether teacher participants understood their experiences with the coaching project as part of their ongoing professional learning. Some participants bracketed the coaching aspect of the project as being significant to their growth. One participant, having experienced assessment as professional learning for some time revealed, “This ongoing 10 years of assessment has not been wasted and we’re still learning and growing.” On becoming a coach alongside teachers, the same participant remarked, “You can think differently as a coach from a coach’s perspective as you do from the teacher who’s on the spot.” Thinking upon the coaching aspect of the AAC project, another teacher proposed:

Any time you can go see another teacher, or any time you can have a coach come in and help you, you’re always going to benefit and improve from it Even if it’s not the same subject, the same Grade, it doesn’t matter, you can always find something that will come back and help you.

In response to this question, other participants emphasized the need for establishing short-term and long-term goals as part of their professional learning. As one teacher disclosed, “Thinking about assessment and trying to figure out assessment and trying to make it work for me was one of my professional goals.” Another teacher remarked on the continuity and trajectory of such goal making:

Sometimes it’s funny when you go to do your PGP [Professional Growth Plan] you think you have to come up with all these new things . . . I’ve dived into it and now next year I’m feeling like I can really sort the pieces out.

For still another teacher, the project was conceived as part of a long-term plan, noting, “It’s my career goal to be an administrator.”

Shifting relationships following AAC participation. When we asked participants if they believe their relationships with administrators, colleagues, and students had shifted following AAC participation, we noticed that, while relationships with colleagues and students may have shifted for a few participants, they focused mainly on their relationships with administrators. One teacher stated there was not a shift in the relationship with administrators because “I had a good relationship with them all before.” This thought was echoed by another teacher who noted “my relationship with my principal has been very good” because of the number of years they have worked together, something which has allowed her to see situations from different perspectives.

There were also comments from teachers about changed relationships with administrators, which indicated opportunities for growth for both administrators and teachers. One teacher described, “It’s not like criticism when we’re trying to help each other, it’s this

positive peer coaching that we've been doing . . . We know where the other's coming from because you've both been there in both the roles." She added, "So it's just really about support." Another teacher noted she did not have a "strong relationship with my other administrators," explaining that she could not "ask them any questions because they couldn't answer me." With her current administrators, she feels she can "have meaningful conversations . . . it's a deeper relationship" which allows her to "feel more supported at the school and it makes me feel a little more confidence in what I'm doing too."

Reflecting more specifically on work alongside colleagues as part of the AAC project, one teacher believed that her relationships with other teachers have "shifted in that when we were having talks about this, I was able to provide them with a little bit of insight in terms of stuff I had experience with." Another teacher suggested the coaching project has "really improved our collaborative relationship" with other teachers, but emphasized "a lot of it just comes down to time." He appreciates that his administrator and partner teacher are learning, and enjoys "the process more because, you know, it's a little more genuine." Although someone had told him when he was a beginning teacher that "this is your show, you're on your own, I'm not giving you any help," participation in the AAC project allowed him the increased trust and "encouragement to go and watch others."

Teachers also spoke of changed relationships with students as a result of the coaching project. One participant illuminated that her relationships with students had changed because "assessment practices do change relationships with kids right . . . you really learn to listen even not with your ears." Another teacher's work with the project included using assessment practices with opportunities to revise previous understandings, which helped her strengthen relationships with "kids who struggle a little more, or who have some test anxiety." One teacher

believed students feel “an all new sort of heightened intensity from [her]” in regards to multiple drafts and revisions in the writing process. This has necessitated many conversations with students about the reasons why she provides detailed feedback. She emphasizes to students:

I care about you a lot and I want you to do the very best that you can do and so there was lots of discussions about that and so I think now my relationship with the students is so much stronger.

Discussion

Similar to our narrative inquiry alongside school administrators, we recognized the importance of earlier professional learning experiences around assessment and various contextual considerations in shaping AAC experiences for teacher participants. Teachers often described preservice and inservice learning as an ongoing process, temporally connecting diverse experiences, initiatives, and ideas in ways that afforded deeper understandings to their AAC participation. Inquiring into the transcripts of conversations with teacher participants, we gained a sense of how certain aspects of the AAC coaching project were being taken up. We noted that for many teachers, trust, in the form of collaborative relations with students, colleagues, and administration, was ascribed significant value. In response to a query about whether the assessment for learning approach affected her relationship with students, one participant revealed, “I feel like I’m building better relationships with that group of kids from what I used to do.” Alluding to the need for trust in the coaching process alongside administrators, one teacher said, “If you were to take somebody and all of a sudden say you know what, we’re doing this, this day, just out of the blue, it wouldn’t be a very positive experience depending on the individual.” Thinking about her experiences alongside her colleagues, a participant expressed

how important it was to feel comfortable in exchanging ideas on formative assessment: “I think this could be really difficult if you just don’t have that relationship.”

The AAC project enabled some teachers to feel a sense of inclusiveness that was missing in previous professional and personal experiences of assessment. Contrasting this project with other experiences of professional learning around assessment, one participant affirmed, “So it was a really good deep in-depth look at different assessment practices in ways that I’d never been able to look at them before.” Another spoke to the difference in how they were assessed as teachers by previous school administrators where it “was very surface level” to now where “it’s a lot more focused, and it’s a lot more relaxing almost to work in that environment, because I know that they’re not walking in and judging everything I do.” One teacher noted that for his school context: “The plan is to move towards more observational collaborative work because our admin and most of the staff now believe that by taking the best of everyone, we can hopefully come up with something that’s greater.” What became visible for us was that for these particular teachers, the AAC coaching model built around conversations, practices, role reversals, and other activities, fostered a synergistic spirit within their school communities.

Many teacher participants highlighted the centrality of time and support structures as considerations. In her discussion about deepening conversations related to assessment practices alongside her school administrator, a participant reflected, “I think the one thing that really stands out for me with the project is that it allowed me an opportunity to be with my administrator for good chunks of time, focused chunks of time.” Several teachers discussed negotiating time constraints alongside expectations as part of their AAC experience. Speaking to the feasibility of the AAC model of assessment becoming embedded in his school context, one teacher qualified, “Unless team teaching becomes more of a focus here and the budget

restrictions that we have in release time and sub time, it's hard to engage [in the process].”

Relating her AAC experience to other reform initiatives, another teacher emphasized that the shift towards assessment for learning is an ongoing process that requires time and structural support: “I've been around long enough to have seen initiatives sometimes very worthwhile and it's come and go because you don't put the support behind it and you don't take the time either.”

Some participants expressed the belief that shifts in assessment practices must accompany shifts in larger reporting practices and structures. One teacher voiced his frustration that the outcomes-based reporting practices he learned during his preservice education program did not align with school expectations for reporting in his first year of practice. He wondered how teachers and administrators might negotiate this tension, especially in high school contexts where Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs) and final report card grades are used as criteria for post-secondary admissions. Another teacher spoke about her efforts in trying to balance formative assessment practices, which often do not entail numeric grades, with final reporting practices: “Now when we're in this formative land and then you have to write these report cards and you don't really have any kind of numbers per se, and I'm still working through that.” She also shared her concerns that parents are sometimes not included in discussions related to the shift to formative assessment practices, leaving individual teachers to try to explain, and sometimes defend, the importance of this approach to teaching and learning.

VII: Semi-Structured Interview with District Level Administrators

As one part of the research, we completed a limited study of the perceptions of district level administrators associated with the AAC project. We selected three district administrators, one from each school division, based on advice from the AAC staff about which administrators would best be able to speak to bringing the AAC project to their school division.

A. Methods

We designed a semi-structured interview protocol to engage in conversations with district administrators, one administrator for each participating school district. The following questions were asked:

1. Basic demographic information: years teaching? As an administrator? With this district?
2. How, when, and why did you become part of the coaching project?
3. How does this assessment project compare with other assessment initiatives you have been part of?
4. What do you see as the possibilities for professional learning around this project?
5. Are there plans for follow-up? If so, what are they?
6. Other things you would like to tell us about your experiences with the project?

B. Findings of the Semi-Structured Interview Study with District Administrators

The semi-structured interviews were conducted over the spring and fall, 2015. One interview was in person and two were through telephone interviews. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to more than an hour. Each district administrator had many years of experience as a

teacher, school administrator and district level administrator. Each had been with their current districts for at least 8 years, some for considerably more years than that.

Each administrator had become aware of the coaching project on administrator professional learning through connections with AAC staff or the AAC board. They had attended AAC-sponsored conferences and other activities. One administrator said that he became part of the project because of his respect for the executive director of AAC and AAC more generally. As he said, “Projects depend on relationships” and noted that he shares “similar goals around assessment” with the executive director of AAC. Another participant indicated that he was on the AAC board and, when he learned about the project, he involved the district although it was initially somewhat difficult to find schools to be involved. Another participant noted that the coaching initiative was a continuation of work ongoing in the district prior to this opportunity.

All three participants indicated that they had been involved with other assessment projects. One participant placed the AAC coaching project in the context of initiatives for improving assessment practices, some of which are 20 years old. He sees the coaching model provided by the AAC working well because of the focus on the content of what constitutes good professional practice. Another participant spoke of how the coaching project is providing “leaders with tools.” He called it a “friendly model”, and spoke of its “collaborative” nature. As he described previous initiatives, he said that over past years the district was involved in developing instructional practice as their focus with a subsequent focus on cooperative learning. As they adopted cooperative learning, they, as a district, realized their assessment practices did not “align.” They began to work with the AAC coaching project and see it as preparatory to their next 3-year focus on assessment. Another participant noted that the AAC coaching project

had more of a leadership focus than previous assessment initiatives and was more focused than other initiatives, as well as providing more external resources including external expertise.

All three administrators saw a great deal of possibility for professional learning around the AAC project. One participant supported the project because he believes it provided capacity building of instructional leaders. For him, the hope of the coaching model is that it increases the capacity of instructional leaders to know what good assessment practice is. Another participant responded to the question about possibilities for professional learning by telling me about a colleague who was working with lead teachers on cognitive coaching. She was concerned that there was overlap. The administrator was careful to note that while cognitive coaching is about “how to talk”, the AAC project is about “what to talk.”

Two administrators raised concerns around assessment, some of which related to the AAC coaching project. One participant expressed regrets that the majority of the teaching profession has not embraced the research on effective assessment practice. As he noted, the coaching model is very good when there are clear criteria for excellent assessment practice or pedagogy. The participant also raised concerns that the idea of building trust as part of this coaching model could be used by teachers as a roadblock. While he understood that there is research on the importance of building trust among school leaders and teachers, he emphasized the need for accountability. His position would be that the trust card should not be played to prevent professional learning. Another concern shared by the participant related to the gap in understanding by both instructional leaders and teachers of what good practice in pedagogy or in good assessment practice is. Another participant raised concerns that the coaching model not be used to replace teacher evaluation and assessment. As he pointed out, when it is up to teachers to select the focus of assessment for their professional learning, it is possible that areas that are of

concern to the administrator are not addressed. He suggested supervision and evaluation need to continue alongside coaching as a professional learning model. This, of course, raises concerns about whether school administrators have time to engage in coaching and supervision and evaluation.

All three administrators indicated there are plans, some of them now in place, for following up with the AAC project. One participant noted that his division would continue with the coaching initiative with assessment being the content because it is part of the culture. They have contracted an outside resource person and do not feel that costs to provide substitute teachers are an impediment. As he indicated, the mandate of the division is built around the core value that teachers need to be excellent, and the district is accountable for ensuring their capacity in assessment. Another participant noted that there are plans for additional administrators to be involved, including department heads and lead teachers. This participant spoke of this as a “strong ripple” from the AAC project. Assessment is now a district focus and there will be support with finances and with personal support. This participant spoke of a teacher who was part of the project who described the working in the project as not being “evaluated” but “coached.” Another participant described plans that are underway in the fall, 2015 for involving four different schools. The schools that were part of the AAC project would continue to be involved through presentations and sharing of their experiences.

VIII: Some Forward Looking Possibilities

While it is not possible for us, as outside researchers to make recommendations, we do see that there is a great deal of possibility for further action following the project. In our conversations with participating administrators this fall, we learned that all three school divisions are moving forward with a continued focus on assessment as, and for, learning. Assessment remains a key focus for the divisions.

Participants indicated the importance of continuing to make assessment for/as learning a strong focus in establishing school cultures in their schools. We see that the focus on collaborative practices of professional learning where school administrators learn alongside teachers and students is a very positive direction. Participating teachers and school administrators drew attention to these reciprocal and mutual ways of learning.

We also, through the stories shared with us by administrators, see the strength in keeping the focus in school change and reform efforts on school administrators' professional learning. The participants noted that being positioned as learners fit with how they saw themselves as working. We see profound ripples in each school's culture when administrators' professional learning is the starting point for change.

We also note the openness of the coaching model that has been developed through the AAC project. Beginning with where each administrator is in his/her learning allows their professional learning to have the most impact in their practices. In our conversations with administrators and teachers they all noted there was strength in working *with*, rather than working *on*, or by imposing pre-specified and pre-determined goals or outcomes. With the flexibility and strength that knowledgeable and skilled coaches can bring, and as exemplified by

the AAC coach, there is power in a more generative and relational practice of professional learning.

We were struck by the sense of agency that teachers and school-based administrators experienced in the coaching model developed and used by the AAC project. It is clearly an innovative approach to coaching that is grounded in the realities of each particular school and staff. We are hopeful that the developmental work around the coaching model will continue and will be shared in publications and workshops in Alberta and elsewhere as it has a great deal to offer to professional learning and to conceptions of school change and reform.